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May 30, 1893.

No. 827.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 cents.

Vol. XXXII.

The Bantam Sport; or, The Mine-Boss Ferret

BY T. C. HARBAUGH.



THE MINE-BOSS TURNED THE KEY IN THE LOCK, AND PUSHING OPEN THE DOOR, STEPPED INSIDE.

The Bantam Sport; OR, THE MINE-BOSS FERRET.

A Story of Mute Merle.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH.

CHAPTER I.

CORPORAL CACTUS.

"GONE ag'in, hey? I wonder what orders he left behind this time?"

"Mebbe none, Mosco."

"Yes, but thar's something in the box," and the speaker, who had slipped a slide in the top of a rude cabin table, opened a piece of folded paper with which he leaned toward the stronger light at the window.

"It's for me individually, Basil," he continued, glancing at his companion, and at the same time refolding the paper and transferring it to his pocket.

"When will Little Silent be back?"

"He don't say."

"He never does that. By Jupiter, he goes where he pleases, and comes when he takes a notion."

There was a half-growl in the sentence.

"Well, doesn't he pay?" snapped the other.

"Yes, he pays—"

"If there is in his employ a man who isn't satisfied, he can call for his accounts at any time. I guess the Cactus Queen is a pretty good bank."

"I am not talkin' of quittin'," the man Mosco put in, hurriedly. "I'm satisfied with the place I have—"

"So are all of us, for that matter. I'd sooner be under Mute Merle than be the slave of either Captain Poncho or Major Mesquite. We never get cursed, eh, Basil? The boy is one of the most unfortunate creatures in the world, but if he keeps on he'll be one of the richest."

"If the big and little nabobs don't absorb him."

"I'd like to see 'em do that!" was the instant retort, and the brow of the speaker suddenly got a cloud. "It won't be done, I guess, while the boys of the Cactus Queen stand together, and if Little Silent is but a boy, I guess he is match enough for the major and the captain."

This conversation took place in a cabin at Cinnabar one of the wildest districts of the Sierra Nevada, in the southernmost part of Arizona.

The place had a population of several hundred souls. Some fortunate man had discovered the wealth of the mountains, and the usual rush had taken place. From nothing Cinnabar had sprung into existence with a queer crowd, men of many nationalities, but with the wild West adventurer predominating.

Among the first arrivals, and the third person to stake off a claim, was a well-built boy of seventeen. He was good-looking despite the deep look of pain always to be seen on his face, and amid the noises of the mountain camp he was as silent as the Sphinx.

Cinnabar soon came to know that the boy mine-owner was a mute, and the name of Mute Merle was given him by common consent.

He drew about him a lot of unemployed men, and it was not long before his mine, christened the Cactus Queen, was in full operation and the best bonanza at Cinnabar.

Mute Merle sometimes went away on long and unexpected journeys—unexpected at least to his mine-boss, Mosco, and to the common miners as well. On some of these occasions he left orders in the little pocket in the top of the table, and Mosco carried them out to the letter.

But the last time, as we have just seen, the writing taken from the pocket was a private matter which he refused to communicate to his friend Basil, and when the two men left the hut with the very last rays of the setting sun in their faces, it was to separate a few feet beyond the door and go different ways.

"I would like to know what takes Mute Merle away so much," said Basil to himself as he threw a glance after Mosco, whose tall figure was disappearing among the other shanties. "I could get something for the secret if I knew it—I'm sure I could. I sometimes think Mosco knows the secret, but if he does he is as silent as Merle himself, and I'm no nigher the truth than I was six months ago."

Basil walked on till he came rather suddenly upon the so-called Square of the mountain camp.

On one side of it, as Basil approached, a group of men were listening to the loud quarreling of

two persons whose animosities and rivalry had grown with the growth of Cinnabar.

"At it again, eh?" smiled Basil, the miner. "Somebody ought to knock their heads together and teach 'em better sense. I don't believe they would fight if they were pushed onto one another."

Impelled forward by the loud voices of the quarrelers and by the outbursts of laughter from the crowd, Basil crossed the Square and looked at the two men in the improvised ring.

They were as dissimilar in looks and physique as two men could well be.

One was a perfect giant, and the possessor of a frame of which Hercules himself might have been proud. He would have been handsome but for his puffed face which was almost as red as a fighting cock's comb. Well-dressed and hatless, with his dark-brown hair falling to his shoulders, he was always the most conspicuous man in Cinnabar—in figure, at least.

This personage was Major Mesquite, owner of the Live Rattlesnake Mine, and, next to his antagonist, the richest man in the Cactus country.

The second party in the quarrel was the giant's very opposite.

He was not more than five feet in height, if that, and his frame had barely enough flesh to cover the bones. Still, he had a bright eye and a neat mustache which rendered him good-looking. He wore low shoes whose strings were tied with the neatest of bows, and there was nothing untidy about him.

His name was Captain Poncho, and his bonanza, the Golden Slipper, adjoined the Live Rattlesnake, much to the irritation and rage of the latter's owner.

For these two Arizona nabobs to meet, and that was very often, was to quarrel. Their tilts formed one of the standard out-of-door diversions of the men of Cinnabar, for, while they had never come together, they always threatened to annihilate one another, and sometimes drew knives and pistols for that purpose.

On the occasion of Basil's visit to the favorite exhibition ground of the two rivals, which was in front of one of the best-patronized saloons of the camp, Major Mesquite confronted his pigmy enemy with a drawn revolver, and Captain Poncho was telling him in derisive tones that there was not the slightest danger of his perforating anybody.

There is no telling what would have been the outcome of the quarrel, though doubtless the usual result, a frothy separation, would have taken place in due time, but all at once some one discovered a man approaching on horseback.

A moment later it was also discovered that the person in the saddle was tied there with ropes, that his hands were lashed together on his back, and that he was also gagged!

This series of discoveries drew attention from the two Bombastes of the Arizona camp, and while the jaded and tottering horse came on, he was as much a subject of study as his rider.

The animal directed his course straight toward the group on the Square.

"Cut the unfortunate wretch loose!" yelled Major Mesquite. "Stand aside! I'll do it myself," he continued, and a moment later he strode forward and began to cut the thongs that held the speechless man in his uncomfortable position.

As the cords separated the stranger tottered toward Major Mesquite while the horse, relieved of his burden, staggered on a few steps and fell exhausted.

The gag was soon taken from the man's mouth, and he eagerly swallowed the tumbler of brandy which had been brought out from the ranch.

Major Mesquite had already taken charge of the whole proceedings with an assurance that was diverting.

"What place is this?" asked the strange man in gasps.

"It is Cinnabar."

"Who's your most important man here?"

"I am!" said the major. "Major Mesquite at your service."

"That's a lie, stranger," rung out a voice as the little figure of the major's rival strutted forward. "I'm just as important as he. I am Captain Poncho."

A smile flitted across the face of the rescued man. He looked first at one, then at the other.

"Major and captain, eh?" he said as if talking to himself. "I've got a military title, too, though I'm not up quite as high as either of you gentlemen."

"Who are you?" asked both major and captain in one breath.

"I am Corporal Cactus."

The crowd, or one-half of it, smiled grimly at the oddity of the name. Major Mesquite and his rival did not know whether to take the announcement as a joke, or to regard it seriously.

"That's just who I am," continued the stranger. "I've been on that horse for two days without food or drink. How I got there and why, I'm willing to let the future tell, or to write the account in blood. But now I want something to eat."

"You shall have it!" cried the whole camp.

CHAPTER II.

THE STRANGE REQUEST.

CORPORAL CACTUS, if that was the man's name—and he maintained that it was—ate with the greed of a half-famished wolf, and proved beyond all question his assertion that he had not touched food for two days.

Cinnabar did not cut him off with a short allowance, and he was permitted to eat all he desired. The quarrel between Major Mesquite and Captain Poncho was not resumed. Both men were engaged in watching Corporal Cactus, in hopes of hearing a thrilling story from his lips when he had appeased the gnawings of hunger.

But he did nothing of the sort.

When he had washed down his last mouthful with a glass of brandy, he thanked the crowd for its hospitality and hoped that he would be able to return the compliment some day.

"If this is Cinnabar, you have a person here whom I would like to see," he went on. "I don't know what you call him, but he's a boy—"

"Mute Merle?" broke in half a dozen voices.

"That must be the person, for the boy I seek is a mute."

"He isn't in Cinnabar just now, corp'ral," said Mosco.

"He was, two hours ago," snapped Major Mesquite.

The boss of the boy's bonanza turned swiftly on the speaker.

"Two hours since isn't now!" he exclaimed, looking the big nabob over from head to foot, and half contemptuously at that.

"Are you connected with the boy in any way?" asked Corporal Cactus, addressing Mosco.

"I'm his mine-boss."

"Then I'll talk to you, Mr.—"

"Mosco."

"Mosco. Where shall it be?"

"Not here, of course, if it's anything private."

"Well, it's a trifle that way."

Another minute had not elapsed when Mosco and Corporal Cactus walked from the crowd and toward the mouth of the Cactus Queen Mine.

The corporal had not recovered from his forced ride, but he did his level best to walk without tottering.

"So the boy is really here?" he said, looking at Mosco, when they had disengaged themselves from the group.

"Not here just now. He owns the biggest mine in the Cactus country, and if he can't use his tongue, he's got a brain a man ought to be proud of."

Mosco, the mine-boss, spoke with a good deal of pride.

"Well, if I'm to see Mute Merle, as you call him, I don't mind the two days' ride with a gag in my mouth."

"Then, by Jove! it must be important!" cried Mosco.

A smile for a second brightened the thin, sal-low face of Corporal Cactus, and happening to look downward Mosco saw his hands close till the skeleton fingers seemed to bury their ends in the palms.

The new-comer was taken to the mine, the main shaft of which was just at the edge of Cinnabar. Mosco led him into the opening and guided him among the net-work of timbers to a small chamber, into one of the walls of which was fitted a door which when closed left not the slightest sign of a crack visible.

A lamp was lighted and returned to its iron socket in the stone, and Mosco waited for Corporal Cactus to proceed.

"So this is his mine, is it?" he asked.

"This is Mute Merle's bonanza."

"How much does it pay?"

"Oh, that I can't tell you, for I'm not the person who keeps the profits in black and white. Dalia does that."

"Dalia?" echoed Corporal Cactus, repeating the name in a strange voice.

"Dalia is Mute Merle's bookkeeper, and she

knows more about profits than any man in Arizona."

"Ho! Dalia is a woman, then?"

"No, sir; Dalia is a girl not much older than Mute Merle, if any," answered Mosco, with a smile. "You'll see her if you stay here any length of time, for if you have urgent business with our young bonanza king I presume you will wait for him."

"When will he come?"

Mosco shook his head.

"Nobody in Cinnabar knows that," said he.

"Is he absent often?"

"Not very."

"Does he stay long?"

"Sometimes a week at a stretch."

"And you don't know where he goes?"

This question was asked with a good deal of eagerness.

"With all due regard for you, corp'ral, Mute Merle's business is not ours," replied Mosco.

"That is true. I should not have asked such a silly question. Yes, I will wait till the young mine king comes back. But who are those two fighting-cocks who wanted to take charge of me when I met you on the Square?"

"Major Mesquite and Captain Poncho."

"Nabobs here, eh?"

"Yes. We sometimes call 'em the Two Blades o' Cinnabar for they're always sharpened for a fight."

"Do they like Mute Merle, your employer?"

"They don't like anybody who has more than they have," replied Mosco.

"It is thus the world over."

And Corporal Cactus smiled, and then he studied the interior of the little chamber several minutes in silence.

"Who sleeps yonder?" he asked, designating with his glance a cot in one corner.

"Little Silent sometimes."

"Will the bed be occupied to-night?"

"No."

"Would you object to me sleeping there?"

It was a singular request to Mosco's notion.

"We've got plenty of room in Cinnabar. We—"

Corporal Cactus interrupted by leaning forward and touching the mine-boss on the knee.

"But I want to sleep there," said he. "I have a little writing to do and here is a table and a lamp. Why go back to the cabins when everything is so handy where we are? Can you lock the door from the outside?"

"I can, but—"

"Yes, I want that done, too," was the quick response. "To-morrow morning, say at six, Mosco, I want you to come and open the door. I'll be here I trust and safe and sound. This is a strange notion from a man who has gone through the terrible adventure I have had. I knew it would surprise you, but I will stand between you and Mute Merle when he knows that I occupied his bed."

Mosco laughed.

"I'm boss here when he is away and I do what I please," said he. "You shall sleep here if you say so every night till he comes back. With the door locked nobody can get in to you, and you can't get out."

Five minutes had not passed when Mosco went away, pulling the heavy door to and locking it on Corporal Cactus.

"A queer chip with queer notions," said Mosco to himself while he walked back to the cabins with the big key in his pocket. "After all he didn't tell me about his ride bound and gagged across the plains, nor drop the least hint about Corp'ral Cactus's identity. But he knows Mute Merle; wants to see him. Something is in the wind. It's all a riddle to me."

Mosco made no secret of the singular disposition Corporal Cactus had made of himself, and it was not long before Cinnabar knew that its last visitor was passing the night in Mute Merle's private office in the Cactus Queen Mine.

His horse was stiffening in a hollow beyond the camp and the saddle had been hung upon a peg in the saloon to wait for its owner.

Mosco went to his own shanty at last and went to sleep with the iron key under his pillow.

"By Jupiter! I never played jailer before!" was his last thought, for he could not get Corporal Cactus out of his head.

It was barely six the next morning when the figure of Mosco went down through the grass and mountain cacti that lay between his cabin and the Cactus Queen.

His hasty step betokened a strange eagerness; he vanished in the great dark shaft and almost ran to the door he had locked upon the mysterious corporal.

In another moment he had turned the key in the lock and pushing open the portal stepped inside. The room was dark like a dungeon-cell.

Mosco called its tenant's name, but the echo of his voice was the only reply he received.

The mine-boss fished a match from his pocket and scraped it across the rough wall.

Holding it above his head as the flame grew large, he leaned forward, holding his breath.

The next moment he started back with a cry of horror, for, at his very feet, with his face turned to the ceiling and the remnants of some documents clutched in his right hand, lay Corporal Cactus, dead enough to make one more tenant of the little cacti-fenced cemetery at the edge of the plain!

CHAPTER III.

MUTE MERLE'S MISSION.

It was morning on a wide, treeless plain which seemed to terminate far away in the Southwest at the foot of a hazy mountain range.

The sun rising over the expanse melted the scattering drops of moisture on the grass-blades and the needles of numerous clumps of cactus plants. The sky was perfectly cloudless, and the absence of air, and the warmth already in the rays of the sun, betokened a torrid day on the plains.

Near the mountains, but still on the plain itself, moved a dark object that kept a trail leading through the parched grass that abounded everywhere.

It rose and fell like a chip on the crest of a billow, but it kept steadily westward like an unerring arrow in flight.

At last the moving speck vanished, the misty mountains seemed to swallow it, and the plain knew it no more.

Once among the hills, the horse lessened his gait, and his rider, a boy, let the reins drop from his hands.

He was a good-looking youth, well formed, dark-eyed, and seventeen.

But there was on his face an expression of pain. The countenance was not open and smiling. He had the look of a person older than he really was, and the seal of silence was visible on his lips whether they moved or were still.

The boy looked round upon the scenery with a keen eye.

He rode forward some distance after leaving the plain, and almost suddenly found himself at an abrupt bend in the trail which needed the best vision to point it out.

He drew rein at this spot, and putting a whistle to his lips he blew a note which awoke in shrill tones the echoes of the mountain glen.

In response to his call there came in sight a man who brought a quick flash of pleasure into the boy's eyes.

The man was afoot, and his figure, tall and angular, showed to advantage as he came forward.

When he stopped beside the horse, he shook hands with the boy, who bent down with an eager smile.

"I've got news for you, Merle," said the man. "The villains did another mean trick to-day."

The boy said nothing, but with his gaze riveted on the man, waited for him to proceed.

"Of course you want to know what they did," the speaker went on, resting one hand upon the horse's neck. "They caught some poor devil—Heaven only knows who he was—and tied him to a saddle. Besides this they gagged him in such a way as to prevent all escape, and thus pinioned they sent him out on the plain at the mercy of wolf and vulture. I happened to be an unwilling witness to this piece of deviltry; but I did not see them catch the poor fellow. He did not struggle against the indignity, for what would have been the use? There were ten of the enemy. I intended to follow him as soon as it got dark enough to hide my movements, but a regular cyclone swept the plain as I was about to set out and delayed me several hours. I got off at last, however, but for the life of me I could not find a single trace of the unfortunate. God knows what has become of him. You did not see him, of course?"

The boy shook his head.

"I wanted to wade into the gang while they were at work, but I thought of you and curbed my eagerness. They treated their prisoner with the mercy one would expect from a lot of wolves, and told him that it was death for any one to invade their territory without permission. Their territory, Merle!" laughed the man, in derision. "I'd like to know where they got a title-deed for this piece of God's country."

The young occupant of the saddle smiled, but faintly, with the man on the ground, but in another moment his features had relaxed into their old seriousness.

Raising one of his hands he rapidly manipulated his fingers after the manner of a mute, and the man followed the movements with an eagle eye.

"Yes, the Mountain Rattler is with them," he said, when the flying fingers stopped, and the boy once more kept his eyes fastened on the speaker's lips. "He directed the whole proceedings, and it was he who sent the prisoner off with a sentence of doom ringing in his ears."

The boy's fingers put a question.

"What did they do afterward, eh?" replied the man. "They watched the horse and rider till they were to be seen no longer, and then, with a pitiless laugh, the whole gang turned tail and galloped off. They went south toward the lone cabin—toward it I only say, mind you, Merle, for I am certain that they did not molest the old man there."

The boy took up the reins which had lain on the horse's neck, and looked down the trail which lost itself some distance away.

"Are you going to see him?" asked the man.

The boy nodded.

"Have you found her yet?"

Merle shook his head.

"Then old Monteriff won't be very glad to see you."

The fingers moved in the air again.

"You haven't given up the chase, eh?" ejaculated the man while he watched them. "By Jupiter! I admire such pluck as yours. Of course I'm willing to be your mountain patrol as long as you can use me. We work together pretty well."

The boy laid one of his hands upon the tall man's shoulder and looked into his face with singular intensity for several moments.

"How's the mine panning out?" asked the man.

The eyes above him suddenly brightened.

"You're gettin' richer than ever, ain't you, Merle?" he asked.

The boy nodded.

"But you can't keep from leading a double life all the same! You are Mute Merle the young bonanza king, and you continue to be the silent shadow of the cactus trail. I don't see how you manage so much. But never mind; as it is none of my business, you need not enlighten me. I'm willing to serve you and remain in the dark. If you are going down to old Monteriff now, I'll go part of the way with you."

A moment afterward the boy was riding slowly over the trail that zigzagged in and out among the mountains, and the tall man was walking alongside, talking constantly, with his face so upturned as to let the youth see his lips, which he never ceased to watch.

For some distance the couple proceeded forward and at length at a certain spot, the man halted and touched the boy's hand in parting.

"I'll keep my eyes open for the Rattler and his Cactus Wolves," said he. "Of course I never expect to hear of the Mazeppa any more. The birds will tear his limbs from the bonds one of these days and the drama of the plains will end thus for him. Will you come back this way from the hut?"

Mute Merle shook his head in doubt.

Five minutes later he had disappeared to the man who walked back toward the spot where they had met.

The boy rode on till he came across a stout little cabin built against a great rock and a few yards from the trail.

He stopped his horse and studied the structure a few moments with the faintest semblance of a smile at the corners of his mouth.

After awhile he dismounted and led his steed forward, then, dropping the rein altogether, he kept on afoot till he stood before the shanty itself.

No sooner had the mute trailer reached the open door than a man sprang forward and seizing him by the shoulders as he uttered a cry of delight, almost lifted him from the ground.

"You have come! you have come!" he cried. "I've counted the days and the hours! Where is my child?"

Merle the Mute had watched the old man's lips as he had those of the person he had just left.

"What! haven't you found the trail?" gasped the gray-beard, shrinking back with a look of despair in his eyes. "What did I tell you when you were here last? My child is gone! The talons of the White Eagles of Mexico did their work well. You have hunted the trail for months. You told me, Mute Merle, that you

would find the bandits, and my child, as well. Look me in the face and say that you have succeeded. Old Monteriff has given up all hope. He will apply the match to his shanty to-night and join his beloved Florice in the spirit world."

In an instant the boy's eyes lit up with a flash they had not had before.

He passed the old man and snatched a piece of chalk from a little box nailed to one of the logs.

Then he sprang to a blackboard near the box and wrote rapidly with chalk for a second.

When he stepped back with a finger leveled at the writing old Monteriff read:

"My life is in this work! I will find your child or die!"

CHAPTER IV.

OLD MONTERIFF'S STORY.

THE old man eyed the writing for several seconds, and then fixed his gaze on the boy.

"You have promised me before," said he.

"I know you have never made it as positive as it is yonder, and I have a good deal of confidence in you, Merle."

The boy bonanza king stepped up to the blackboard again and erased what he had just written. Catching up the chalk once more, he wrote on the dark surface as swiftly as before, as follows:

"I shall keep my word with you. This is a long trail and a deep mystery. I know how you love the lost, and I shall do my best. I think I have found the trail."

Old Monteriff sprang toward the mute with an exclamation of delight.

"Then I will withhold the torch," said he.

"It is this waiting alone here in the mountain that has torn my soul. My child!—my Florice! In the night I hear the winds speak her name, and I run to the shanty door, crying: 'Here I am, child!' but, of course, there is no answer but a tormenting echo."

"Do you mind going back to the crime?" wrote the boy.

"Not if you think the story may help you along."

"It might," said the talking chalk.

Old Monteriff passed his hand upward over his forehead, brushing back his prematurely silver hair, and took a wooden stool which stood under the blackboard.

"It was fifteen years ago this very night, Merle," he began. "My wife had died six months before, and I was playing with little Florice, then two years old, and telling her about the mother of whom she spoke so often. I recollect that I had sent Montra, my head rancher, over to Colonel Belva's lands after a stray steer, so that Florice and I were the only persons at home. The child grew sleepy at last and then sunk to sleep in my arms. I carried her to bed, and then, hearing a strange noise among the horses in the stables, left her for a few moments. I was not gone more than ten minutes when I came back and tiptoed to Florice's room to look after her. What was my horror to find the little couch empty and the child nowhere! I searched the house from attic to cellar, I gave the grounds about it the same thorough searching; but the child was gone."

"Stunned by the blow, I hardly knew what to do. At last, about midnight, Montra came riding back. His return seemed a godsend to me. We renewed the search together. At the cross-trails, about half a mile from the house, we found the fresh hoof-prints of two horses. It was a clew. Montra, who was a true cattle-trailer, took up the clew and I followed. We ran the hoof-tracks till we lost them, and as some one had to go back to take care of the ranch, I returned and left Montra to pursue the enemy. From that time to this, as I have told you before, Merle, Montra, the *vaquero*, has never reported. I have not seen him from the moment of our separation. You have asked me with your chalk if I believe that he was a traitor, and I have replied in the negative. I can't believe it. Why, Montra and Florice were great friends. He doted on the child."

"When I took up for myself the long hunt which was destined to end in despair, I looked for my cattle-boss as well as for the child. I would be on the trail to-day but for that fall which I sustained in the mountains the third year after the tragedy. I shut myself up in these hills to bide my time—not that I could hope for vengeance, Merle, but I imagined that here among these solitudes I heard Florice's voice speaking as she used to speak in my arms."

"But I have something to tell you. You may laugh at me, especially since I have told you

about hearing the child calling when the winds blow, but I want you to know it. At the time of our discovery at the cross-trails I took a cast of the horseshoe impressed in the earth. It was a peculiar shoe such as I had never seen before. I kept it under lock and key at the ranch on the Rio Grande until it was burned with the house five years after Florice's disappearance. Now I have taken another cast of that same horseshoe!"

Mute Merle bent forward, and touching Old Monteriff's arms looked at him excitedly.

"I took it this very day, too," continued the old man, smiling at the boy's eagerness.

"I came across the track unexpectedly, and was not more surprised than was Robinson Crusoe over the footprint in the sand."

Mute Merle's eyes got more astonishment than ever.

Old Monteriff went to a heavy wooden chest in a corner of the cabin and unlocked it. Taking from the chest a piece of clay, he came back to the boy and handed it to him.

Little Silent of Cinnabar found in his hands the exact impression of a horseshoe, and Old Monteriff watched him closely while he studied it.

"That is the counterfeit of the shoe I saw at cross-trails near No. 10 Ranch after Florice disappeared," continued Monteriff when he happened to catch the youth's eye. "It proves to me that the man who had a hand in the deed fifteen years ago is still alive—not only that, but he knows where I am. What do you think?"

"Show me the trail," wrote Mute Merle on the blackboard.

"Now?"

The boy nodded.

Old Monteriff led the way from the hut, and Merle led his horse along the route they took.

More than a mile from the cabin in the mountain the old man suddenly halted and pointed toward the ground.

The young mine-owner got down and looked closely at the hoof-prints visible in the earth.

"What do you say?" said Monteriff, as the boy looked up into his face.

Mute Merle answered with a smile and a nod. Then taking the rein which he had dropped to examine the track, he pointed back toward the shanty.

"Are you going to follow the trail?" asked Monteriff.

The boy's eyes said "yes."

"Well, you'll lose it on the plains," continued the old man. "I did. It leads down to the grass and the cactus clumps, and beyond a certain place you will find—nothing."

These words did not discourage the boy in the least.

He put one foot in the stirrup and vaulted nimbly into the saddle.

"If you are going may God reward you!" exclaimed Old Monteriff holding up his hand which Merle took. "You have put hope into my heart once more. I trust you won't lose the trail on the plain as I did, but my eyes are old and much watching for my lost child has made them dim."

The hands of the two—man and boy—fell apart, and as the latter waved a parting salute from the saddle, the horse moved away down the mountain path.

Old Monteriff watched the Boy Nabob out of sight and then went back to his lonely cabin.

As for the young trailer, he rode on with his eyes fastened on the ground at his horse's feet.

Every now and then he saw a hoof-print that seemed to give him encouragement, for his eyes brightened and a smile would steal over his face.

He followed the trail down the pathway lying in the shadow of rock and tree till he came almost suddenly upon a wide expanse of plain, across which he could look to the distant horizon with nothing to break the dreary monotony of vision.

Where there had been bare ground beneath his horse's hoofs, there was now grass, sprinkled here and there with flowers and little pyramids of cacti.

Of course the trail he had followed was now lost, as if the grass had swallowed it up for the purpose of deceiving him.

The boy dismounted and looked the ground over with the eye of a thorough scout. Now and then he parted the grass tenderly and looked among the roots for the points of the iron shoe.

He had spent some time at Old Monteriff's and the sun was high in the heavens, beating down upon the plain with the fierceness of a furnace fire.

When Mute Merle went back to his horse he mounted and stood erect in his stirrups while he

shaded his eyes with his hand from the glare of the sun.

He looked long and hard across the scorched expanse, then dropping back into the saddle he caught up the lines and struck the horse sharply with his open palm.

The splendid animal obeyed the command by springing forward.

He carried his young rider swiftly across the plain until from their starting-point they would have looked like mere specks on the waste.

At last Mute Merle drew near a clump of tall cacti. It was a landmark on the open and one toward which he had been riding for some time.

The tall plants sent their spiny arms in every direction, and the strange group looked stranger still on the burning plain.

As the boy bonanza king drew near to the cacti, there was a movement of something alive beyond the spines, and all at once a horse walked out from concealment and the man in the saddle threw a Winchester to his shoulder, and covered the mute!

CHAPTER V.

CACTUS VULTURES.

THE quick glance of the boy caught the movement in an instant.

He saw, too, that the man in the saddle was powerfully formed, and that above the full beard that covered his face glittered a pair of deep-set eyes.

Mute Merle's hand had been placed upon the butt of a revolver, but it got no further; the weapon was not drawn.

The strange man by the cactus clump still covered him with a steady aim. His bronze finger in the trigger-guard of the Winchester rested lightly against the trigger itself, and the boy could see that he was at the mercy of a desperado of the Southwest.

All at once the horse of the stranger moved toward Mute Merle, but the rifle was not lowered.

Nearer and nearer it came, and at last the man was so close that he could have touched the boy.

The rifle now dropped suddenly, and Merle looked into the face which almost touched his.

"You didn't expect me here, eh?" laughed the border bandit. "No, of course you did not."

There was no reply, though it was evident that the sharp eyes of the young bonanza king had read the moving lips of his foe.

"You're the young mine-owner of Cinnabar, ain't you?" continued the man.

Merle nodded.

"You're rich—the richest citizen there, they tell me. I know all about your affliction, but you can read conversation by the lips, and that is something. Do you know me, Mute Merle?"

The young miner's look answered in the negative.

"You'll know before I'm done with you," continued the desperado. "Let us go forward. You were pushing westward, I believe?"

Mute Merle drew back, but the quickly-darting hand of the man closed on the rein and the next moment the horses were side by side.

"We won't go very far, maybe," said the stranger, looking at the mute. "The plain is broad, but it does not reach to the coast, as you know."

Then the two rode away with silence between them, though Mute Merle watched his dark-faced captor closely, and was as covertly watched in return. Perhaps the Boy Nabob wondered if the man had waited for him at the cactus bushes, and whether he was being conducted to the desperado's companions.

The sun was once more setting on the treeless expanse, and the vultures that whirled in the lofty air saw the strangely-met couple whose steeds bruised the young shoots of cacti that were everywhere.

"Faster than this!" suddenly exclaimed Mute Merle's captor, who had zealously guarded his identity from the first surprise.

The horses broke into a gallop and away they went toward the declining sun, leaving far behind them the rough hills that hemmed in Old Monteriff's shanty.

These hills faded from view at length, and after a long gallop the boy and his guard came to the edge of the open and entered a belt of timber.

In another moment Mute Merle knew that he had been conducted to a rendezvous of some kind, for he was face to face with a number of men, the most of whom were large and dark like his captor.

Here and there were horses already saddled,

and from some of the saddles hung weapons of various kinds.

It was a camp.

In a little while half a dozen rough-looking fellows had crowded forward and were looking at the boy with grimaces of delight.

"Captain Monte didn't spread his net for nothing this time," was a common expression among the men. "He knew that something would come into it and something did. Hey, thar, captain. What is to be the ransom?"

The Boy Nabob's captor turned to the speaker with a smile.

"Do you know him?" he queried with a glance at Merle.

"Why not? He is the young Vanderbilt of Cinnabar. He's able to buy himself off with a good pile. You don't want to let your modesty get the better of you, captain, when it comes to naming the ransom. He has the chink and enough to make little nabobs of every one of us."

Mute Merle was looking at the speaker, but it was a question whether he could read his lips for the shadows that prevailed throughout the camp.

"Don't let the ransom trouble you," answered the person dubbed Captain Monte.

"But you'll make it big enough?"

"I'll see to that."

One by one the men drew off, having inspected Merle to their satisfaction, and the man who had caught him came forward and signed to him to dismount.

In another minute the young Nabob of Cinnabar stood on the ground alongside his horse, but with one hand resting on the bridle as if he did not want to be deprived of the comradeship of the faithful animal.

Captain Monte took his arm and drew him away, then he looked him in the eye as he said:

"You know enough, I trust, not to give us trouble. These are some of the gentlemen of the cactus country. They don't stand on much ceremony, but they're not hard to get along with if one knows how to behave himself in their presence. I am Captain Monte, and these men are my companions. If you have thought since the surprise on the plain that I was watching for you you are not altogether right. I was watching for some one else, but everything is fish that enters my net, and I consider you a fish worth holding. What will you give for a ransom?"

The boy fell back at the abrupt question. The look of the speaker gave his words an emphasis not to be mistaken.

"I thought I would startle you a little, yet you ought to have guessed ere this that we live by our wits and our hands," he went on. "The men know you already. You are Mute Merle the Boy Nabob to every man in camp. You are rich enough to give us an order on your mine-boss for fifty thousand if you are able to give it for a cent. Don't shake your head, King Merle, for we know your circumstances, and, then, you want to go back to your trail."

Captain Monte and the boy were now approached by several men, one of whom, a person with a handsome face under a large hat, came close enough to touch the prisoner.

"We'll make a Mazeppa out of you unless you pay well to hold us back," this fellow said. "Don't play the 'poor' game on us. We know how much the Cactus Queen yields, and that it is worth more than Major Mesquite and Captain Poncho's bonanzas put together. If Captain Monte is slow to name the ransom, we are not. We want an order on Mosco for fifty thousand dollars in bars or dust."

"Not so fast, Dagger Dick," said Captain Monte.

"Why not? Are we going to give this young gold prince a chance to get away? The last man we turned loose to play Mazeppa was a Tartar. Corporal Cactus, he called himself, didn't he? Now, let this bird off without a feather from his wings, and the gentlemen of the cactus kingdom may spread their nets elsewhere."

The men who heard these words applauded them in various ways.

"It's fifty thousand or nothing!" resumed the handsome bandit, looking at Captain Monte with defiant fierceness. "State the proposition now!"

By this time nearly every occupant of the camp faced Mute Merle and his captor, who seemed to hesitate.

"Fifty thousand or a terrible sojourn on the plains as a doomed Mazeppa!" cried Dagger Dick, facing the Boy Nabob. "You can read the lips of those who address you. We know all about this wonderful faculty you possess. Now, as Captain Monte is modest, we take the

matter in our own hands. Here are paper and a pencil. Give us the order on your mine-boss and treasurer. You will be kept in safety here till the money has been paid. After the transaction you shall be set at liberty."

The border Apollo had stepped between Captain Monte and Mute Merle with provoking coolness, and was holding forward a bit of dirty paper and the stub of a pencil.

The boy's figure appeared to increase in stature as he stepped back and looked at the tough.

"Won't you write the order?" demanded Dick.

The boy took the proffered materials and spread the paper upon his lifted knee.

Then he wrote:

"I will not treat with a set of bandits like you. I will not be robbed by a lot of cactus vultures who haven't drawn an honest breath for years."

"MERLE OF CINNABAR."

He handed the answer to Dagger Dick, who read it first to himself with flashing eyes, and then aloud to the assembled crowd.

Loud cries of rage met the defiant reply.

"That settles the matter!" shouted the spokesman of the bandits. "We'll give the vultures another rich feast of human blood!"

CHAPTER VI.

ADRIFT ON THE PLAINS.

MUTE MERLE could only look at the man who gave utterance to this merciless sentence, and upon the ruffians by whom he was surrounded.

Captain Monte seemed on the point of remonstrating with Dagger Dick and those who sided with him, but he did not, and soon walked away leaving the bandit mob to carry out its villainy.

There was on Captain Monte's face a smile of triumph which he did not try to conceal.

"Why not?" he muttered. "The boy might agree to give the fifty thousand if I took charge of the negotiations, but the attitude of Dick and the parols will keep him stubborn and send him adrift on the plains. Isn't this the best thing for me? I don't want Mute Merle where he is, and he must not go back to play longer the rôle of the Boy Nabob of Cinnabar."

Merle's eyes could not help following Captain Monte while he walked away. Was it because he detected something familiar about the figure of the leader of the cactus banditti, or did he think that he was losing the only friend he had among the hard crowd?

At any rate, he was in a moment left alone with Dagger Dick and his companions.

They closed about him like a pack of wolves about to make the last assault at a given signal. They were between him and his steed, and had but to put out their hands to finish his career.

"Bring up the horse!" cried Dick.

"Which one?"

"Not the boy's own, of course," was the response. "He knows the way home and would go thither like an arrow. Bring forward the young black we caught in the timber last week."

"He belongs to José."

"But you can have him," halloed José himself. "He threw me to-day, and I don't want my neck broken. I'll fetch him up."

The man who went off at this, a young fellow with a Mexicanish cast of countenance—soon returned leading a young horse sleek and black, with an eye full of fire.

"That's your horse," said Dagger Dick, leaning toward Mute Merle as he covered the skittish animal with his finger. "If you steadily refuse to give us the order on Mosco we'll tie you to the black, who will be left blindfolded on the plain to wander—Heaven knows whither. Take two minutes and make up your mind for life and death."

The cactus desperado folded his arms and looked at the boy, who was eyed also by the other men.

José held the black horse and all waited silently for the Boy Nabob's reply.

The two minutes were lengthened into three in the boy's favor. The men began to growl at the added time, and Dagger Dick unlocked his arms and touched Mute Merle.

"The time is up," said he. "Do you still refuse?"

The young tracker nodded emphatically in the affirmative. He seemed determined to adhere to his resolution not to be robbed by the human vultures of the wild Southwest.

The brigands broke out into curses and cries of rage at the decision.

"The ropes and the horse!" exclaimed Dick, with a gesture, as he turned to the men. "Bind him upon José's black, and I will finish the game."

A number of lasso-like ropes were produced in a twinkling, and two men seized Merle and carried him to the horse. In a moment he was set astride of the animal, and men who knew what they were doing and how to do it began to tie him there. A rope was passed under the black steed's belly and around his ankles, then his hands were secured on his back, while his body was given enough liberty to let it fall forward on the horse's neck.

Mute Merle looked on with eyes which did not omit the smallest particulars of the tying.

He saw the last knot made, and when the men stepped back—all but José, who still held the bridle—he was as well secured to the black horse as ever Mazeppa was to the Tartar of the Ukraine.

"I guess it's finished here, Cap'n Dick," said one of the ruffians. "Did you say you was going to conclude the job?"

"I am," was the response.

Dagger Dick walked off a few paces and vaulted lightly into a saddle.

In a moment he came back well mounted, and the crowd gave way as he approached.

Mute Merle saw him clutch the black steed's bridle, relieving José of his charge.

"Have you got the blindfold, cap'n?" asked a man in the crowd.

"Yes."

The following minute the two horses were moving away together.

"A boy fool sure enough," was laughed behind Mute Merle as he was taken off, and the men in big boots and spurs sent more than one good-by and rough joke after the young nabob, though they knew that he could not hear a single one.

We shall not attempt to analyze the boy's thoughts when he found himself going back toward the cactus plain, this time tied to a horse of which he knew nothing and in charge of a man as heartless as the comrades he had just left.

The sun had gone down again, and the timber behind the boy miner looked dark and ghostly.

Ahead lay a most forbidding aspect, which seemed full of doom because it looked boundless in shadow.

Dagger Dick, whose handsome features appeared to have changed for the worse within the last few minutes, still held the bridle of the black horse, which kept alongside his own steed as if he loved the companionship.

The journey grew longer and longer as the moments waned. The shadows of evening gave place to the one shadow of night, and after what seemed an interminable ride to the captive boy, a halt was made in the middle of a starlit expanse.

Without a word, Dagger Dick drew the black horse close alongside and in a moment clapped a bandage over his eyes. The animal resisted by throwing up his head and trying to twist out of the hoodwink, but Dick who evidently had performed the operation before from the way he managed it now, soon had the cover tight and immovable.

Then the bandit looked at his work with a grim smile, a part of which the Boy Nabob caught as he turned upon him.

The sky overhead was thickly sown with the most brilliant stars. Their light almost took the place of a full-orbed moon, and the keen eyes of the sentenced boy plainly saw the lips of Dick the bandit as he leaned toward him for the last time.

"You took your choice, boy," said he. "You love money better than life itself, and you will soon discover that the Cactus Brotherhood never plays when it means business. This horse is blindfolded. You are lashed to him to the end. There is no need to gag you, because you are speechless. These plains are waterless as you know. The dew that falls from above can afford you no extension of a terrible existence. There are vultures in the air, and wolves in the grasses of the valleys which your horse may find despite his hood. Good-night, Merle of Cinnabar! This is your own undoing. A fool and his money are soon parted! Good-night!"

The Boy Nabob saw a short whip in Dagger Dick's hand as it rose from his side.

He saw him pull his horse aside, and then the cowhide lash came down upon the black steed's back, causing him to clear several feet at a bound, and to spring blindly away at a pace that threatened to unseat his rider in spite of the cords that held him down.

The cactus brigand watched the blindfolded horse till he vanished somewhere ahead.

"He's gone to join the man we sent out yonder the other day," said Dagger Dick. "No,

they will never meet. What was I thinking about? Corporal Cactus and Mute Merle will not see each other, for the sun and the vultures have already finished one, and vultures and sun will soon finish the other."

The man rode back.

He gave his horse both rein and spur as he dashed through the starlight toward the camp in the timber, and through the small hours of that eventful night he was challenged by a ghost-like sentinel and was once more at home.

As to the Boy Nabob of Cinnabar, none of his enemies could say what had become of him.

When morning came the nimblest man of the lot climbed to the top of a lookout tree at the edge of the timber and swept the plain with a powerful glass.

But he saw nothing, not even the smallest moving speck which would have told that the boy Mazeppa had not already perished.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CIPHER MESSAGE.

In the excitement which followed Mosco's discovery of Corporal Cactus dead in the private chamber of the Boy Nabob's mine, the quarrel of Major Mesquite and Captain Poncho were forgotten.

It was the first really strange occurrence that had taken place in Cinnabar for some time, and it was strange enough to talk about.

Mosco at first thought that Corporal Cactus had either destroyed himself or had been the victim of sudden death; but there were some things about the affair that looked like murder.

The torn papers clutched in the corporal's hand told of a desperate struggle of some kind, but between him and—whom?

Mosco had slept with the key to the chamber under his head. He was a light sleeper; the slightest sound and the lightest touch always disturbed him. Surely the key had not been stolen during the night.

He had found the door of the corporal's chamber locked, but when he opened it he found him on the ground, dead.

The papers in the clinched hand told Mosco nothing.

They were covered with a mystic writing which neither he nor any one else in Cinnabar could read.

Corporal Cactus had died without disclosing anything about himself, and Mosco said nothing about the questions he had put concerning Mute Merle.

It was the night after the corporal's death, and Cinnabar had settled back to comparative quiet.

Major Mesquite was munching his usual late supper in his cabin.

There was an air of contentment about the somewhat cramped premises, and the big major was quite alone.

He was in the act of lifting a tinful of black coffee to his lips, when his door opened with a peculiar noise and a head was thrust inside.

Major Mesquite looked over his coffee at the head, which was hatless, perhaps out of respect to the occupant of the cabin.

"Come in," said the major, and a man with a dark face and a pair of observing black eyes glided in.

"Ho! you have something for me, eh? Let me have it."

Major Mesquite held out his hand to the man, who brought up a small bit of paper from the depths of his bosom.

The eyes of the big man twinkled.

"Something happened here last night," he went on, unfolding the paper as he glanced at the messenger, who was not a citizen of Cinnabar. "We had to bury here to-day a man who should have been buried elsewhere. But I won't growl over it since the drama has been played out so far as he is concerned."

Then the major spread the opened paper on the table and fell to work on its contents. The writing was in cipher and somewhat similar to that which Corporal Cactus had left behind. He seemed to have the key, however, for he ran his finger over the characters as he spelled the words out to the end.

"Well," said he, suddenly looking up. "That man died here in Cinnabar last night."

The messenger came up to the table with a quick spring.

"No!" he cried.

"Well, he did," persisted the major. "I can show you his grave—the newest one in the lot."

The strange man was nonplused.

"Then, by Jove! the horse must have slipped

the hoodwink!" said he, at length. "Had the corporal the gag in his mouth when he came?"

"He had. Of course, with his hands tied behind him, he could not slip that out."

"What sort of story did he tell when you took the gag away?"

"He wouldn't tell any. Afterward he went with Mosco to the boy's bonanza and concluded to pass the night there. He did so, and this morning Mosco found him there dead. Who adjusted the hoodwink?"

"Captain Monte."

Major Mesquite was silent for a moment, during which time his eyes wandered back to the paper lying open before him.

"I have another question," he said, looking at the man again. "Who fixed hood number two?"

"Dagger Dick."

The answer seemed to please the major.

He made no reply, but took a memorandum from an inner pocket. He tore from it a blank leaf and covered it with characters similar to those on the paper he had received from the messenger.

When he had finished he folded the writing and gave it to the man, who put it away in a twinkling.

"Where are you now?" asked the major.

"I left the band in the Scarred Timber."

"How long will you remain there?"

"That depends on you."

"I've no orders," smiled Major Mesquite.

"You have just received all I have to give. You don't want to tarry in Cinnabar. There are some almighty sharp eyes here just now. We are getting a good grip on the bonanzas, but a blunder would spoil all. Go at once. Where's your horse?"

"Under the big tree just beyond the camp."

Major Mesquite went back to the coffee, which had cooled perceptibly, and the man moved toward the door.

"May I ask a question?" he inquired, his black eyes glowing with merriment.

"Be quick about it," snapped the major.

"I'd like to know how you and the captain are getting along. You haven't whipped him yet?"

The big man colored to the roots of his hair.

"No, but I intend to thrash the ground with him!" he exclaimed.

"When?"

"Very soon."

"He does not look like a handful for you, major; but he seems to be more cat than kitten, after all. I—"

"There! You want to get away from here before you've been seen," interrupted Major Mesquite. "It won't be night always. By Jove! if the second hoodwink pans out no better than the first one did, there will be the Old Harry to pay right here in Cinnabar."

He waved his hand in an imperative gesture toward the door, and the messenger went away.

Major Mesquite picked up the cipher message, and held it over the flame of his lamp till it dropped as ashes from his hand. Then he hastily finished his interrupted supper and put the tin dishes away.

"I thought it was a bit of bungling the moment I saw the man," he said to himself. "Now, if Dagger Dick has done no better—"

He did not finish the sentence, but sprung to the door and jerked it open.

"Hello!" exclaimed a voice in the light that was showered from the shanty.

The giant nabob of the cactus kingdom stared in amazement at his rival and enemy, Captain Poncho, on whose face rested a quiet smile at the surprise he had occasioned.

Perhaps the major suddenly recalled his statement made to the man who had just gone that he would "thrash the ground" with the little captain, and here was an excellent opportunity.

"I want to see you—on business," continued Captain Poncho, and at the same time he stepped into his enemy's cabin and stood at the table.

Major Mesquite turned on him with a growl.

"I think, sir, that we ought to investigate," said Captain Poncho, gazing up into his rival's face.

"Investigate what?" echoed the major.

"Why, there's only one thing that needs it," was the prompt retort. "I refer to the tragedy of the Cactus Queen Nine."

"Oh!" ejaculated the giant, and his eyes seemed to devour the atom of humanity so firmly planted before him. "I would like to know how we can find out why Corporal Cactus shut himself up in the boy's bonanza and then took his own life."

Captain Poncho's eyes fairly glittered while the major talked.

"Do you think he did that, major?"

"I do. Mosco, the watch-dog of the mine, locked the corporal in and then slept with the big key under his head. I don't see what there is to investigate. What do you see in it, sir?"

The dwarfish figure of Captain Poncho left the table and straightened half-way between it and the door.

"I see more than suicide," said he. "Corporal Cactus, whoever he was, was killed by some enemy—"

"With that big door locked?" broke in the major.

"That's what we want to find out, and that's what we are going to know."

"Who are we?"

"Captain Poncho for one!"

In an instant the massive form of Major Mesquite swept forward as if it was about to crush the little man.

"I'll thrash the earth with you if you insinuate that—"

"The earth will never be thrashed, Major. Good-night!" and Captain Poncho was gone.

CHAPTER VIII.

MERLE ON THE PLAINS.

If any citizen of Cinnabar had heard the parting words of the two rival nabobs he would have regarded them as a continuance of the feud that had troubled the camp from the beginning of its existence.

Captain Poncho was less excited than usual when he walked away.

"I think I shot a bolt beneath his armor," he laughed, thinking of his tilt with the major. "He knows, at any rate, that we don't intend to call it suicide just because he does. I didn't see a man come out of Mosco's cabin at the dead of night to let him sneak off unnoticed. That isn't my style. When Mute Merle comes back, and maybe before, we'll know more than we do, and Major Mesquite won't be as near the ownership of the Cactus Queen as he considers himself just now."

When Mute Merle comes back!

Was the boy sent adrift on the plains by the Cactus Brotherhood ever to come to his own again? Had not the vultures already found him amid the arid waste where the only shadows were those of the sharp cactus and the skeleton grass-blades?

We left him, as the reader will recall, alone on the desert with Dagger Dick, riding back to the rendezvous among the trees.

Mounted on a blindfolded horse that still smarted under the stroke of the bandit's cowhide whip, he was borne swiftly away. The animal galloped at random, and Merle was soon far from the spot of the separation.

He tugged at his wrist-bonds in vain.

The Brotherhood had tied them for good, and he found that the thongs seemed to sink deeper into his flesh the more he exerted himself to remove them.

At last the black horse grew tired of his run in the dark.

He slackened his gait and finally walked slowly through the grass. A thousand times he had tried to free himself from the hoodwink by various twists of head and neck, and the helpless boy who watched these attempts with eagerness, saw every effort end in failure.

Overhead stretched a mighty azure field sown with countless multitudes of stars. In every direction from beneath the horse's feet trended the unbroken plain.

Mute Merle could gaze at the starlit landscape, knowing that the morning would show him a limitless waste without an oasis of any kind.

Whenever the horse in his wanderings faced the north star, the Boy Nabob would urge him in that direction by means of thumpings in the ribs with his heels, but the black steed would suddenly turn and carry him another way.

At last the tired boy fell asleep, and the horse stood still near a clump of cacti.

The hours went by unheeded, by Merle, at least.

When he awoke the first rays of a scorching sun were shining in his face. He looked around him with breathless eagerness.

It seemed that he had been transported to the center of an ocean of calm. Not a breath of wind stirred the grass, and his searching eye could wander from horizon to horizon and see nothing.

The horse appeared to know that another day had come.

He stretched forward, raised his head and sniffed the air.

Merle watched him with signs of hope. The hood had not left its place, and not a beam of light penetrated its folds.

"The sun came up unclouded, and with many signs of the heat he would soon dispense. As he crept higher, the horse, after a few bites at the short grass, started off in a gallop which his young driver could not check even if he were so minded.

For more than an hour this strange run was kept up with diminished fervor. When it ended, the black steed stood on a slight elevation, with the rough outlines of some very rough country in the distance.

Merle, the Mute, knew the contour of the hills, and that among them stood old Mont-criff's shanty.

If the horse could be persuaded to continue his journey to the hills themselves, he might be released, but all at once the black dashed in an opposite direction and the hills faded again.

Not long afterward the sun was beating down on the waste with all the fierceness of a furnace set in the sky. The heat was terrible. It seemed to blister the Boy Nabob's face, and the sufferings of the horse for water threatened to drive him mad.

The black once more stood still on the plain. There were no shadows anywhere but his own and his rider's.

Mute Merle fell forward exhausted.

He passed into a semi-consciousness of torture that seemed to fill his flesh with a thousand needles.

When he came out of the trance, he saw first a moving shadow on the plain, then another and another. Looking up he discovered a pair of swooping wings, large, black and ominous.

Instinctively he recoiled at the sight as far as his position would admit. He knew that the vultures had already found him, and his parched tongue counted the sixteen pairs of pinions in the sky.

If the horse could see them would he not make another effort to escape? But there was the baffling hoodwink!

Lower and lower came the gigantic birds as their mid-air circles contracted, and the boy watched them with a curiosity impossible to describe.

They were only waiting for the black horse to sink to the ground exhausted in the furnace heat of the sun. Then they would make the last circle and end all.

Mute Merle suddenly applied his heels to the black's flanks. The horse started forward, but soon halted again. His spirit had been burned out of him.

"This is terrible! It is death!" the Boy Nabob must have thought at that moment.

All at once, far across the plain and against the line of the horizon, a dark speck, or rather a series of specks, was seen to move. The young mine king watched them, and forgot the vultures in his new discovery.

Suddenly the figures disappeared, but in a little while they came in sight again and seemed to have increased in size.

Merle did not take his eyes from them now.

Were they coming toward him, or did the treeless distance and the glare of the sun deceive him?

At length he made out that the objects were men on horseback, and the next minute he saw that they were Indians.

To fall into the hands of a lot of Apaches was no better than further torture on the plains.

Mute Merle knew the wild red robbers of the American desert.

Once they had swooped down upon the outskirts of Cinnabar and had lost a chief and ten warriors in the affray.

But now there was no escape. It was only a transfer from the vultures of the air to the wolves of the plains.

All at once the black horse caught the scent of the approaching band, but the sun and thirst had done the work for him.

He made an effort to resume the battle against death. He tottered forward and stopped again.

But his movement had proved enough. The Indians had seen it and had altered their course.

Now they were riding straight toward Mute Merle one after the other. Some stood erect on their steeds shading their eyes from the sun and others were looking to their weapons.

Suddenly they circled round the boy, and rode inward with whoops and shouts which he could not hear.

The black horse pricked up his ears, but he had not the strength to fly from the foe.

In a short time Mute Merle was the central object of a wild red crowd.

They peered into his face and gazed at his bonds with all the curiosity of a lot of Cosacks.

Presently one of the band who seemed to recognize the young nabob drew back and made a significant gesture with his hands. It told the red-skins that Merle was a mute, and then followed a lot of Apache gibberish and pantomime which further fixed his identity in their minds.

In the midst of this business a knife flashed in the sun behind Mute Merle, then the same blade severed the thongs that bound him to the horse, and as a powerful Apache jerked him from his seat, the black steed pitched forward on the parched grass!

"The young gold king of the white men shall have food and drink!" exclaimed the Indian, as he held Merle before him and looked into his face. "He cannot talk, but his eyes know what the lips say. Lean Feather has heard of him before to-day. He will give the Apaches all he has to go back to the camp. He shall go back, and Lean Feather will see the boy chief strike the men who tied him to the horse!"

Mute Merle smiled, for the wolf had shown mercy.

CHAPTER IX.

A WITNESS MISSING.

RELEASED by the Apache chief, the Boy Nabob staggered to his black steed lying in the beating sun. The brave animal was already dead, and the hoodwink had been stripped from the glassy eyes by one of the Indians.

Mute Merle picked up the cloth, and, after eying it for a moment, placed it in his bosom; then he came back to Lean Feather and laid his hand on the Apache's arm.

"The boy gold-king shall not suffer. He shall go back to his people!" said the Indian. "His hand itches to pay the bad men back, and as the Apache hates them, too, he will laugh when the young avenger strikes."

In less than half an hour from his release, the young miner was far from the spot, and in the midst of the Apache band. His thirst and hunger had been quenched, and he was ready to go back to Cinnabar.

At a certain place beyond the waste of dry grass and cactus, all the Indians but Lean Feather turned away, and he rode on with the chief at his side.

Night was falling over Cinnabar when the Apache pointed at the lights that told where the mountain camp lay, and the next minute Merle was riding the last stage alone.

He appeared like a spirit from the dead to Mosco in the latter's little hut.

"Have they seen you enter Cinnabar?" cried the mine-boss.

Mute Merle shook his head.

"Then let us go to the mine. I want to tell you all there."

The boy and his best man went straight to the private chamber in the Cactus Queen, and Mosco lighted the lamp on the wall.

Then Merle watched the overseer's lips while they related the story of Corporal Cactus's arrival and his swift fate.

He did not miss a syllable of the entire narrative.

"There is open war between Major Mesquite and Captain Poncho," concluded the mine-boss. "The captain has gone so far as to call a court for a thorough investigation of the corporal's death. Major Mesquite is outwardly subdued, but he is furious. A man who does not belong to Cinnabar was here last night. Dalia saw him come and go. Captain Poncho has summoned her to court. She knows that the man from beyond held a conference with the major, and—"

Mute Merle checked Mosco by a touch and talked for a second with his fingers.

"Where is Dalia now, eh?" returned Mosco. "She was at home a few moments ago."

"Does Mesquite know that Dalia has been summoned?" Merle asked, in his way.

"He does."

"Then, Mosco, the girl is not safe."

The mine-boss started to his feet in an instant.

"She will be safe here!" he exclaimed.

"When does the tribunal meet?" asked the fingers.

"To-morrow."

"Go and bring Dalia here."

"Now?"

"Now."

Mosco was off in a moment.

When he was gone Mute Merle drew a stool up to the table beneath the lamp and began to examine the torn papers which Mosco had taken from Corporal Cactus's dead hand.

The cipher seemed too much for him though he brought all his thought into play as amid the most profound silence he wrestled with the puzzle.

It was apparent to him that the corporal had not been permitted to finish his task. Death had interfered. He had covered several sheets of paper, however, which, in the absence of a key with which the writer might have supplemented his work, contained more than one riddle for the boy.

Meanwhile Mosco had gone back to Cinnabar on his errand.

The little cabin inhabited by Dalia, Mute Merle's girl bookkeeper, was one of the neatest-built structures in the camp.

Her hands had adorned its inside walls with many specimens of female handiwork, and a bench in front always bore the rarest flowers of the Southwest.

Mosco, being on a secret mission, approached the cabin with much caution. He was to conduct its tenant quietly to her employer, and it was desired that neither Major Mesquite nor any of his party should be aware of the transfer.

The cabin was dark when Mosco rapped on the door.

There was no response.

He waited awhile and rapped again, but with the same result.

Then he tried the latch, and as it yielded he opened the door and walked in.

"Dalia! Dalia!" he called.

But the girl did not spring forward and her voice did not respond.

Mosco knew that the cabin was without a tenant.

After a little spell of waiting in the gloom, he drew back and went out.

"This means something," muttered the mine-boss. "The witness has been visited. I know it, but by whom? Ah! whom will her evidence damage? By heavens! I see through the game that has been played!"

The big miner of Cinnabar had flashing eyes and clinched hands while he spoke.

He stood in the starlight a few rods from Dalia's cabin and looked toward Major Mesquite's shanty in which there was a light.

Impelled forward by a sudden impulse, as it were, he went toward the cabin as if he intended to dash into it and demand of its owner what he had done with the Rose of Cinnabar.

But Mosco came to a halt as sudden as his start had been.

All at once the head and shoulders of a man appeared between him and the major's window.

They were distinctly seen, and what was more, their shape rendered their owner known to Mosco.

Captain Poncho was playing spy!

Now, Mosco was anxious to know what the little captain was seeing beyond the window, for the head remained in one place above the rude sill.

He had no doubt that Major Mesquite and some one else were holding a secret conference, all of which was fish for the captain's net.

Mosco went forward till he stood within a few feet of the eavesdropper of the camp.

He had not been mistaken—the man was really the captain.

But suddenly this tableau was broken in a manner unexpected to both Captain Poncho and Merle's mine-boss.

The half-muffled report of a pistol broke the stillness of the scene, and with a sharp cry the head at the window vanished from the light, and something came tumbling toward Mosco like a Jack suddenly ejected from his box.

Mosco knew it was the captain, and he made a grab at the figure as it tumbled by, but his fingers merely touched it and did not stop its flight.

Some distance beyond Captain Poncho seemed to recover, for he stopped and looked toward the cabin.

At the same time the door opened and the bushy head of a man—not the major—was thrust out.

It was seen for a moment, when it vanished again and the door was closed.

"Won't I make him pay for this to-morrow!" cried a voice near Mosco, and the mine-boss saw the liliputian figure of Captain Poncho shaking a fist at the cabin. "He's played a bold hand, but a miss is just as good as a mile, for I'll be on hand at the tribunal loaded for bear. And don't you for a moment forget this, major."

The fist fell with a parting demonstration, and Captain Poncho started off, but turned suddenly at the sound of steps behind him.

Quick to meet a foe on his own ground, the pigmy threw a hand toward his revolver when he discovered that the approaching person was Mosco.

"What tumbled you from the window?" asked the Boy Nabob's mine-boss.

"Did you see me?" was the quick response. "Major Mesquite shot at my head by one of the quickest movements I ever saw. The bullet broke the glass in front of my face, and I left the window in a jiffy. But just wait, sir. We'll balance accounts to-morrow. It will be done even if I can't find my most important witness."

"The girl?"

"Dalia. She has been taken off by the man who knows more about Corporal Cactus's death than any one in Cinnabar, and somehow or other he has discovered what Dalia was going to tell. My best witness is gone, sir, but it is some time before the investigation begins. I am going to make an effort to trip Major Mesquite between now and then. If your employer would come back—"

Mosco touched Captain Poncho's hand.

"He has come back," said he.

The little captain gave a start and opened his eyes.

"Where is he?"

"Where he can be seen—if you want to see him."

"Does the major know of the return?"

"No."

"Then let it be a secret still. Major Mesquite is just now playing the most desperate and deadly game ever played by any man in Arizona."

CHAPTER X.

A CLOSE SHAVE.

MUTE MERLE, waiting with a good deal of impatience for Mosco in the private chamber of the Cactus Queen Mine, sprung to his feet when the mine-boss came at last with his story of a fruitless mission.

His fingers moved with lightning rapidity before Mosco's eyes.

"This is Major Mesquite's work," they said.

"He is playing a bold though secret game for possession of the Cactus Queen. He has coveted the bonanza ever since it was opened. It has eclipsed his own mine, and no one knows this better than the major himself. I don't altogether trust Captain Poncho, for he has set envious eyes on me, and either of the nabobs would like to get a grip on the Cactus Queen. Dalia must be found, Mosco. She shall be before the investigation, for since I have put it is and that together, since I have deciphered Corporal Cactus's document, I am going to fight Major Mesquite and the robbers of the plains for all there is in it."

Merle threw upon the table as he spoke the bits of paper which Mosco had found in the dead hand of the mysterious Corporal Cactus.

"Who was the corporal?" the mine-boss asked looking at the boy.

"He was more than he pretended to be," answered the swift fingers. "I had to read broken sentences and severed words. Corporal Cactus was a man who could have enlightened Old Monteriff to a certain extent. He was once a Night Rider of the Mexican border, but never joined the infamous Cactus Brotherhood. Still, he knew some of their secrets for he had been their prisoner before the last ride they gave him across the desert. The man actually knew the secret of the loss of Old Monteriff's child, as he has related it to me times without number. Mosco, I am going to tell you a secret."

"Not if you don't want me to have it, I hope," said Mosco.

"I want you to know it for I trust you," Merle went on. "Corporal Cactus was on his way to Cinnabar when the Brotherhood caught him. Somehow or other he discovered the secret of my absences from Cinnabar. He knew that I often went to Old Monteriff's shanty, that I listened every time to the old man's story, and that I had sworn to find his Florice for him. Thus Corporal Cactus came to me with his secret, but it is one no longer. Mosco, my brave fellow, when we find Dalia, we find the old hermit's child."

Mosco could hardly wait till the last word had been reeled off the fingers.

"Then we find her!" he exclaimed. "We can commence the hunt now."

Mute Merle went to the door and laid his hand on the heavy knob, but there he stopped.

"If you go, Major Mesquite may see you," said Mosco.

The boy came back.

"Must I hide from that man?" asked his fingers. "I know what brought the nocturnal messenger to Cinnabar—the man whom Dalia saw. Captain Monte sent him to report my capture and exile among the cactus and the vultures. With me out of the way the major thinks he will soon own the Cactus Queen, but I am still in his path, though he knows it not. I say, Mosco, must I hide like a hunted deer from this bandit wolf of the border?"

"For a while," replied the mine-boss, calmly.

"Captain Poncho will hunt for Dalia between now and morning. He will do it secretly and alone, for some of his miners are suspected of treachery, and he dare not trust them as against his powerful rival. Therefore, let me take the trail. There is a place in which to look for the Rose of Cinnabar."

"The major's bonanza?"

"Yes."

"Have all your wits about you if you enter 'The Live Rattlesnake,'" admonished Merle.

"I won't leave one of them on the outside! And let me return the advice, Captain Merle. Sleep with one eye open if you must sleep here while I am gone. You know what followed Corporal Cactus's coming to Cinnabar. I have told you who I found the other morning on the floor yonder as dead as Haman."

Mute Merle smiled at these words and saw Mosco vanish and the door shut behind him. He went back to the corporal's paper and read it again after he had placed the several pieces side by side on the table.

It was a mystery no longer. Perseverance and pluck had made it clear, and he knew that Old Monteriff was not childless, and that Major Mesquite was a member, ay, really the chief, of the Cactus Brotherhood.

For more than an hour the Boy Nabob studied the cipher as if he were completing the sentences broken or unfinished.

He was surrounded by rough walls, through none of which there was any egress except through the strong door.

As he looked at the portal in the light of the lamp he seemed to wonder how Corporal Cactus had been surprised. He knew that Mosco had slept that night with the key under his pillow, and that the mine-boss maintained that it had not been abstracted. Equally positive was Mosco that he locked the door when he left the corporal alone.

After all, might it not have been suicide?

Not there were the torn papers in the dead man's hand, and there was the bruise of fingers at the throat.

Somebody had stolen upon Corporal Cactus; the door had been opened! But by whom?

The boy's speculations were interrupted by the sudden winking of the light.

He seemed to apprehend danger, for he left his chair and turned the light out, leaving the cell in Egyptian darkness.

The next moment the mute of Cinnabar was at the door with one hand resting lightly upon the lock. The slightest jar would be to him as good a warning as a sound to ears as keen as the fox's.

For five minutes the young mine king did not stir in the dark. He knew that the presence of something in a certain corridor beyond the cell had caused the lamp to lose for an instant its supply of air from the outside and to blink suddenly.

Had Mosco come back?

All at once Mute Merle felt a sensation that for a twinkling took his hand from the door.

It was suddenly repeated, and quick as a cat he sprung back from the door and forced his body under the low iron bedstead of the cot.

He barely had time to draw his feet in after him when the door opened and he felt a puff of new air on his face.

In a moment, as the cell became as close as before, a match sent forth its little flame, and as it burned up Merle saw the well-known face of Major Mesquite.

The nabob of the Live Rattlesnake Bonanza was not alone. Near him stood his mine-boss, a long and lank individual with a large head covered with bushy black hair.

The major moved the burning match hither and thither before his face while he inspected the cell, and the malicious eyes at his right were as keen as his own in the inspection.

The young nabob watched the two men with a secrecy which suited the perilous occasion to a dot.

He knew what would swiftly follow discovery, for there was a Satanic eagerness in the major's eyes.

Suddenly the big ruffian flung the match to

the stone floor of the chamber, then the strange air struck Merle's face again and vanished as before.

He lay for ten minutes longer under the cot and then crept out.

He was again alone!

CHAPTER XI.

CAUGHT.

THE young Nabob of Cinnabar wondered if Major Mesquite had a suspicion of his presence in the mine. There was on the big schemer's face an expression which indicated that he had sought the chamber of the Cactus Queen for a diabolical purpose, yet Merle thought that he had entered the camp unperceived.

For several minutes he did not attempt to follow the major and his comrade of the bushy head. He stood in the dark at the door with his hand on the lock as before, ready to go back to the gloom beneath the cot at the first touch of the key.

But the nabob of the Live Rattlesnake did not come back to send him again to that uncomfortable retreat, and after awhile he unlocked the door himself and looked out.

A dark and narrow corridor stretched before him. It was a passage which he had threaded a thousand times, and he knew all its turns as well in the dark as by torchlight.

The boy miner shut the heavy door softly after him and went down the lonesome way.

He guided himself by a hand on the wall at his right, and as his feet sent forth no sound for the fine dust that covered the ground, his journey was as noiseless as the crawl of a cat.

Merle went deep and deeper into the heart of his bonanza.

Did he think that he was following Major Mesquite, or was he off on another mission called out by the visit of the gold giant to the mine?

Mute Merle did not halt until he stood on what seemed to be the brink of a ledge beyond which the very heart of darkness lay.

Another step would have precipitated him into a shuddering abyss, but instinct or knowledge had stopped him at the right moment.

For some time he stood there leaning against the rough wall at his back and apparently waiting for an event of some kind.

At length a star seemed to burst into being far across the black chasm and some feet beneath his position. It wavered for a moment and was then stationary.

Merle watched it intently from the first, and while he did so it grew larger or appeared to do so, and for a time it seemed to approach, moving mysteriously through space.

By and by the star grew into the form of a bull's eye and a sudden shifting of it to one side showed Merle two figures behind it.

His eyes got a new glitter when he made the discovery. The light was no longer a star, but a lantern operated by a man who was walking on firm ground.

The Boy Nabob crouched in the path along the rocky ledge and fixed his attention on the moving figures below.

Now he saw the lantern throw its light upon one wall, now upon another. Wherever it touched the rocks it showed the work of mining, for the men under the ledge were in one of the newly-opened gold-chambers of the Cactus Queen.

Already Merle had recognized the bearer of the light.

It was Major Mesquite!

Behind him, or at one elbow, walked the bushy-headed pard who was the boss of the Live Rattlesnake Bonanza.

Merle knew him as well as he did his master. It was the major's first visit to the forbidden depths of the young Nabob's mine, and his countenance told Merle that the richness of the bonanza astonished him.

Every now and then the major would examine the rocks with the eye of a person well versed in mines and mining. The man with the bushy head did the same, and over a rich piece of quartz the two rascals would put their heads together and make estimates that dilated their eyes.

Merle the Mute regarded them till his indignation seemed to get the upper hand of his better judgment.

Drawing a revolver, he leveled it at the man who carried the lantern, and for a moment the life of Major Mesquite was not worth the dust under his feet.

But a different resolution suddenly took possession of the boy miner.

He seemed to realize the importance even to him of the life he held at his mercy. Major Mesquite was supposed to hold the secret of

Dalia's disappearance, and now that he (Merle) knew that the girl was the missing child of Old Monteriff the mountain hermit, he could not destroy all hopes of finding her by shooting the invader of his mine.

He put up the revolver almost as suddenly as he had drawn it, and as the men below moved off, he let them depart without a retributive shot.

Merle saw the light shine here and there as Major Mesquite and his overseer disappeared, and at last the gold chamber was wrapped in darkness once more.

The Boy Nabob crawled back along the ledge, believing that he had seen the last of the big Croesus for the night, but all at once he came almost face to face with him, where he did not dream of meeting any one.

Major Mesquite was not alone.

As before he had the bushy-headed man with him, and the lantern had been deposited in a natural niche in such a manner that its light fell upon their figures.

The young mine king had the shadows on his side and he crept forward until he gained a spot close to the two men.

The major was talking, and as he stood squarely in the light the keen eyes of Mute Merle watched the movements of his lips.

Never before had he watched a man with such intense curiosity.

But Major Mesquite was speaking in low tones and the boy could not fairly catch the motion of his lips because of this caution.

Now and then, however, as his eyes indicated, he picked up a word, but the overseer's replies were lost to him, as he could not see that individual's face to advantage, it being half in shadow.

Major Mesquite and his pard suddenly left the place.

The bull's-eye lantern was extinguished, and Merle, with cat-like tread, followed the pair to the very mouth of the mine.

They went toward the shanties of the camp satisfied, no doubt, with their night tour, and the mute was left to do as he pleased.

For a few moments he stood at the mouth of the shaft apparently undecided. Mosco had not come back from his second hunt for Dalia.

Merle knew that his cool and faithful mine-boss would leave no stone overturned, but he realized the extent of the danger that lay ahead. All the cunning and the villainy of Major Mesquite and his companions would be put forward to defeat the ends of justice, and if Mosco were caught in the "Live Rattlesnake" his life would not be worth a fig.

When Merle moved from his last halting-place it was not to go back to the private room in his mine. He went down a narrow path that promised to lead him into the heart of the hills, but he suddenly turned aside and ran toward the major's bonanza.

During one of Major Mesquite's friendly freaks he had been permitted to inspect the interior of the "Live Rattlesnake," but now he was approaching it without a guide. If he entered would he not thrust his head into a noose of danger?

The Boy Nabob of Cinnabar approached the mine with extreme caution. He found no one on guard at the mouth, and without a minute's hesitation he went in and was swallowed up by the dense darkness.

He knew that the front of the "Live Rattlesnake" was similar to that of the "Cactus Queen," and for a short time he had no difficulty in pushing forward.

But at a certain spot he halted and found a solid wall in his path.

His feeling hands discovered niches in the stone, rising one above the other like the rounds of a ladder.

After a ladder ascent and in a moment Mute Merle was climbing up hand-over-hand he knew not whither.

For some little time he kept fearlessly on, and when he paused at last he found himself on the top of a wall not very broad but like solid stone.

Merle rested there after his climb.

Ten minutes later, having discovered that the other side of the strange barrier was similarly provided with niches in the stone, he went down among the darkness—down to—what fate?

It seemed an endless descent to the boy miner, but he struck ground at last and stood still where he landed.

If he had had the use of his ears he would have heard a voice by which he would have been thrilled:

"Somebody came down the wall. I know it!" said the voice in the gloom of the cavern.

"I didn't hear him," was the response.

"I don't see where your ears war. I'll bet my head that somebody is over ag'in' the wall now."

"Throw a light on it."

"That would give us away if the person who came down should happen to be any o' the captain's spies."

"By Jupiter! I don't like to sit here in this suspense. I won't, either!"

The following moment there flashed on the wall the bright light of a bull's-eye lantern, and as it covered Mute Merle he fell back and stared at the globe of fire behind which towered the gigantic figures of two men who were thunder-struck on seeing him there.

It was a startling tableau.

Merle knew the men, and they knew him.

They were two of Captain Poncho's miners—two of the suspects—men who had sold themselves and their services to his rival, the major.

"It is the mute boy—the young gold Jonah of Cinnabar!" cried one of the twain. "If he escapes we are gone!"

In another second the men moved toward Merle, but quick as had been the flashing of their lantern, he stepped back to the wall and covered them with a six-shooter.

CHAPTER XII.

THE UNDERGROUND RIVER.

THE scene revealed by the light which had been turned on for the purpose of discovering who had come down the wall was a most striking one.

Merle could retreat no further for his back was against the rough stone, and in spite of his determined front and the menace of the revolver the two toughs were not disposed to give up the battle.

They knew that the Boy Nabob's discovery fastened upon them the crime of treason to Captain Poncho. They had sold themselves to Major Mesquite and stood ready to carry out any plan proposed by that designing rascal.

One of the men suddenly caught up the light and held it so as to let its light fall with full force upon his face.

As he did this he leaned forward and laughed.

"Don't you know, Nabob Merle, that one shot from your pistol would be the death of you?" he suddenly exclaimed, his language being interpreted to the boy by the movement of his lips.

Merle made no reply of any kind.

"You cannot shoot both of us at once, and almost as soon as your bullet was in the head of one the other would have you in a grip of death," continued the man. "You came here on a spying expedition. We know what our presence in the 'Live Rattlesnake' tells you. You never saw us here before, but there are lots of our kind in Cinnabar to-night. Captain Poncho won't have a body-guard when he convenes his tribunal to-morrow. The upper hand belongs to Major Mesquite, and within the next forty-eight hours there will be but one bonanza king in this camp."

This speech seemed to fix Merle's whole attention on the speaker.

The man did not stand more than five feet away.

Suddenly the second miner somewhat in shadow leaped straight at the young Croesus, and although Merle attempted to cover him, he was struck with the force of a catapult bolt and dashed against the wall.

Then the man with the light sprung to his comrade's assistance and the weapon was wrenched from the boy's grasp, and he was firmly held.

There was speedy execution in the looks of the toughs.

Light but strong ropes kept Merle's hands bound on his back, and with a man on either side he was conducted from the chamber by an arched way which he had not seen before.

The two traitors took him down a winding corridor and through several rooms of the mine. They seemed to be moving toward the heart of the earth and while Merle was thinking that the journey was never to end, he was halted for the first time.

One of the men now held the light forward in such a manner that it was reflected brilliantly on a glittering surface a few feet away and Merle saw that they stood on the bank of an underground stream with a sluggish flow.

The very motion of the water was enough to send a chill to his heart, and while he looked, the two men regarded him with a smile that told his doom.

"If you came hither to explore the secret recesses of Major Mesquite's bonanza, the black

river will assist you," said the bearer of the light. "It runs through the undiscovered gold-rooms and into the very depths of the earth."

One of the men left Merle and the other and disappeared, but in a few moments he came back carrying a piece of timber which, though quite large, seemed as light as a cork.

Merle was placed on his back upon the stick and firmly lashed there with strong cords.

This operation was performed near the wall of the cavern through which the stream ran, and before his hands were fastened for the voyage the Boy Nabob took a piece of chalk from his pocket.

"Don't let him write anything!" cried one of the rascals, and at the same time he caught the boy's wrist to carry out his command.

But already the chalk was at the wall, and in the space of a second it wrote rapidly and in characters plain enough to be read by all:

"Treason and cunning in Cinnabar shall come to naught!"

The men looked at one another and smiled grimly.

"Just as if he expects to survive the voyage!" exclaimed one, and with one sweep of his big bronze hand he erased the words. "Now, Nero, into the River of Death he goes to be thrown out upon the unknown shore."

Merle and the log were picked up by the traitors and held between them for a second, then they swung their burden back and forth for a little while and tossed it out into the water.

The noise of Merle's immersion in the element awoke a thousand ghostly echoes. The boy disappeared entirely for a moment, but he came to the surface in the glare of the light and floated slowly away on a voyage to the unknown!

He was watched by the two men until he was no longer visible and then he was borne under an arch which was so low that at times he brushed the dark ceiling.

The young nabob of Arizona had heard of the subterranean stream which flowed through Major Mesquite's mine, but he had never dreamed of taking a voyage on it in person.

Mosco had once stood on the banks of the stream, and had even fathomed it some distance from shore, but whither it went and where it ended nobody knew.

The current was not swift at any place. It bore the young mine-king forward at a steady rate, always through the most intense darkness and apparently ever in the middle of the stream.

When they had seen the last of Mute Merle the men went back to the place where he had surprised them. From there they went to the mouth of the mine and thence to the cabins of the camp.

The secret of the boy's doom was their own. They had finished the career of the young nabob of Cinnabar and had given Major Mesquite a firmer grip on the coveted bonanza.

When they had separated, one sought out the major's shanty by a cautious route.

He tip-toed to the window and looked in.

The figure of the big Vanderbilt of Arizona was seen at a table.

The man outside watched it for a moment and then knocked.

As if there was something peculiar in the noise, Major Mesquite turned his head and then admitted his visitor.

The traitor came forward with a leer of victory on his face.

"What would you give for good news?" he asked, as he leaned toward the major.

"That depends. Have you any real good news?"

"I think I have."

"Well?"

The man seemed to step back as he eyed the big nabob.

"Say, major, where does your underground river run to?"

The question brought a smile to Major Mesquite's lips.

"That's a queer interrogative!" he cried. "Why don't you ask me about the source of the Nile?"

"Because I don't want to know that," replied the traitor.

"Well, I don't know what becomes of my river. But why?"

"We've just sent a fellow to solve the mystery," grinned the man.

"Sent him down that river?"

"Yes."

"Who was he?—a spy?"

"Of course a spy," was the response.

"Where did you catch him?"

"In the heart of the Live Rattlesnake."

"Was it Mosco?"

"No."

"The captain then?"

"Nor Captain Poncho either."

Major Mesquite looked puzzled.

The man leaned closer till their faces nearly met. The major caught the victorious glitter of his eyes and knew that the next words would be something startling.

"The explorer of your river is the boy himself," said Nero. "He is no less a personage than Mute Merle, the Croesus of Cinnabar. Don't you think my secret is worth something?"

Major Mesquite fell back in his chair and stared aghast at the revelator.

"You don't tell me this for the truth?" he suddenly cried.

"Why not? Why should I come to you with a lie of this sort?"

"Then I was not misinformed! The boy did escape the perils of the plains. He came back to Cinnabar! Yes, sir, the secret is worth something."

The major crossed the room and unlocked a heavy wooden box in one corner.

Diving one hand into its depths he took out a good-sized buckskin bag and brought it back to the man.

"Take that and keep a still tongue in your head. Remember! you know *nothing*!" said he, and a look toward the door dismissed the astonished miner.

A minute later Nero was ten rods from the cabin, and the first figure he saw was that of Captain Poncho, the man whom he had betrayed.

The little captain seemed omnipresent.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LITTLE CAPTAIN'S GRIT.

BRIGHT and early the next day the figure of the little man in high boots emerged from the opening to the Golden Slipper Bonanza.

Captain Poncho may have passed the night in his mine, or he may have visited it on business.

The spies in Major Mesquite's service who saw him come forth alone noticed that his eyes had not the snap of triumph as when he called together the tribunal which was to inquire into the death of Corporal Cactus.

Something seemed to have fallen like a damp blanket upon the captain's prospects, and those who watched him walk toward the cabin exchanged glances of satisfaction.

Captain Poncho had not discovered the whereabouts of his principal witness, Dalia. Without her he could fasten nothing upon his old rival, the major.

He shut the cabin door with a mad oath.

"I'm worse off than I ever was!" he growled.

"Not only has Major Mesquite taken my witness, but he has seduced my men from me, and I haven't six faithful ones in my gang. What shall I do?—call him out and shoot him? He would not come out. He prefers to fight me by secret and unfair means. Where is Mosco? He started out last night to find the girl. And Merle? Is he still cooped up in his own bonanza?"

If the captain had known what had taken place he would have consulted his watch with more nervousness than he did.

"I can't go back now," he went on. "The hour for the assembling of the court has been fixed. There is but one way to evade it, but I won't adopt it. No, if I am in a nest of traitors I won't play coward."

Captain Poncho looked to his revolvers and went out on the street.

The sun had risen and the citizens of Cinnabar were on the streets.

Every one seemed to have more than one look at the little man as he strode leisurely across the Square and entered the long room with a bar at one end on the furthest side.

Major Mesquite was ahead of him, and the first person seen by the owner of the "Golden Slipper Mine" was the giant of the "Live Rattlesnake."

But there was a man in the room whom Captain Poncho did not know.

He stood near the counter with his elbow resting lightly on the edge of it.

He was well-dressed in a suit of clothes not very much worn. His boots came nearly to his knees and had gold thread at the tops, and his wide-brim hat which at the time was thrown back, showing a deep forehead, had a wide silk band of crimson.

He was handsome both in face and figure, just the sort of man to attract attention on the border.

Captain Poncho noticed that this brigandish-looking fellow was talking to Major Mesquite, and as if he was the subject of their conversation the stranger looked rather hard at him when he entered.

The Nabob of the Golden Slipper passed to a table at which three men were playing in spite of the early hour.

But all the time he looked through his dark lashes at the major and the unknown.

He soon saw that he was closely watched in return.

"This is a trap," said the little man to himself. "I have walked into it like a fool. I'll bet my head that the door is already locked, for Major Mesquite's best man, Taos Turk, has just moved away from it."

As if to test his suspicions, though really for the purpose of getting a better position, Captain Poncho went back to the door.

As he laid his hand on the latch, a number of derisive laughs fell upon his ears, and he wheeled with crimson in his cheeks. The door was locked, and Major Mesquite was still talking to the stranger as if utterly oblivious of the merriment at the captain's expense.

For half a second Captain Poncho stood facing the crowd with his back toward the door, then he stepped quickly forward and suddenly leveled his finger at a red-faced ruffian who was eying him with poorly-suppressed glee.

"It is the coward who locks a door on a man already entrapped!" exclaimed the little captain. "The strange gentleman at the bar, if he does not know the man to whom I refer, let me say that he wears the clothes of Taos Turk and stands yonder with guilt on his face and the blood of a six-foot coward in his veins!"

Captain Poncho had a good space of rough floor all to himself. He rung out his words with an emphasis that compelled attention, and one-half of the listeners expected to see the man thus singled out bound forward like a lion.

But Taos Turk did nothing of the kind.

"You see, Captain. What's your name, the sort of people we have here!" continued the little man, addressing the stranger. "The bigger a man is in Cinnabar, the less courage he has," and the captain sent a quick glance toward his old rival, who flushed in spite of himself.

All the reply Captain Poncho got was the echo of his words, and this maddened him beyond description.

Now he saw through the scheme, which had been helped on by the locked door and the silence with which he had been met.

He had promised himself to keep cool before entering the trap, but his anger got the better of his resolution.

The following moment he seemed to clear the space between Major Mesquite and himself by a single bound.

Throwing himself back before his rival, he inserted his thumbs under his armpits and looked up into the major's face.

"Did you purchase them singly or in a lump?" he exclaimed. "And what have you done with the witness, Major Mesquite, alias Captain Santa Anna of the old Monterey Trail?"

The last words contained a sting that made the big Nabob of Cinnabar wince.

He changed color twice from red to white and back again.

At the same time he got the benefit of the handsome stranger's look which had left Captain Poncho when he spoke the new name.

"See here, you had better look outside," said the major, with the sneer of a bully in his tones.

Captain Poncho met his answer with a laugh.

"You see he pretends to be a quartz mill that crushes at one turn," he said, to the stranger.

"Do you know my friend here? As Major Mesquite or as Captain Santa Anna? He is just now in the business of inducing men to desert their old employer, and of concealing important witnesses in a case that demands investigation!"

Major Mesquite grew very red in the face again.

"I'm glad to say this is the only combination of rooster and peacock we have in Cinnabar," said he, indicating Captain Poncho by a contemptuous look.

"But that, sir, is not the only assassin and coward we have here!" and the quivering finger of the little man covered the giant, who fell back and threw one hand toward his hip.

One might have heard a leaf fall upon the boards at Captain Poncho's feet at the end of his withering sentence.

The stranger looked at both men, but more particularly, and in amazement, at the captain, whose fearlessness was the unexpected.

"Open the door and let the fighting cock strut outside," said the major, at length. "If he crows a little longer I'll shoot the top of his head off."

"You will, eh?" retorted Captain Poncho. "I've 'crowed' before, as you call it, and I'm still here with the same old head on my shoulders. If you mean business, major—if you are not blowing off as usual—just step out in front of the house, and mark off the ground you've threatened to mark off so often. Show your grit now, or forever!"

"Put that man out!" broke in the major, appealing to the crowd.

In a second a pair of Titanic arms encircled Captain Poncho's body, and despite his efforts to break away, he was carried bodily across the room to the door which was already open, and the next instant he was pitched headlong upon the Square.

Almost before he alighted, which he did at full length, Major Mesquite turned to the stranger and said half under his breath:

"That is precisely what I waited to happen. The fool out yonder will make a bolt for me the moment he gets up, and I will drop him on the step, dead and forever out of our way!"

Captain Poncho was a second getting up on his feet, but the moment he did so he drew a revolver and sprung toward the ranch.

But he was not permitted to reach the door, which Major Mesquite had mentally transformed into a dead-line, for all at once he was caught up by a pair of big brown hands and jerked back without ceremony.

"Don't rush to death!" said a voice at his ear. "I've just come from my hunt, and we need you more than ever."

The speaker was Mosco, the mine-boss.

CHAPTER XIV.

FIGHTING FATE.

A LOUD laugh greeted Captain Poncho's failure to reach the door of the ranch, where a deadly bullet from Major Mesquite's revolver awaited him.

The captain was firmly held by Mosco until he gave his promise that he would go with the mine-boss and not rush headlong to death.

The two walked away and entered Mosco's shanty.

"When does the Tribunal meet?" asked Mosco when he had shut the door.

"At ten o'clock this morning."

"Where is your principal witness?—found yet?"

Captain Poncho started.

"What! didn't you strike Dalia's trail?" he cried.

A singular smile appeared at the corners of Mosco's mouth.

"Yes," he answered, "I found the trail."

"Hers?"

"Dalia's."

"Where is she?"

"Somewhere underground, but that is not what I want to talk about."

"I don't know of anything more important."

"We have lost Little Silent."

Captain Poncho gave the speaker a look that bordered on incredulity.

"I thought he was to remain in his bonanza until—"

"Until I reported, eh?" put in Mosco.

"Yes."

"I thought I would find him there when I returned, but the chamber was empty. The young Nabob of Cinnabar has fallen into a trap."

"Not in his own bonanza, I hope?"

"Not there. Do you know anything about the underground river that flows through a part of Major Mesquite's claim?"

"I have heard of it."

"Well, I have seen it," answered Mosco. "I have even stood on its banks since leaving you. There is where I lost Mute Merle's trail."

"On the shore of that Arizona Styx?" exclaimed Captain Poncho.

"Nowhere else."

"What took him thither?"

"The indications are that he did not go all the way on his own accord," smiled Mosco. "I found the foot-tracks of three persons on the banks of that infernal river. Merle's were among the number. Two of the persons came away from the stream; the others did not."

"You don't mean to tell me that Merle was consigned to the waters of the underground river?" cried Captain Poncho.

"I mean nothing else."

The little nabob was on his feet in an instant.

"This is more of Major Mesquite's work!" he roared. "If he isn't playing a big hand, I never heard of one in all my life. There is a new man in Cinnabar and he knows the major. I wish you could get a look at him—"

"I have seen him," interrupted Mosco.

"When?"

"I saw him come."

"This morning, eh?"

"Just before daylight."

"Do you know him?"

"I am good at guessing," laughed the mine-boss.

The little captain looked at him amazed.

"I would like to hear your guess," said he.

Mosco stepped forward and touched the captain on the shoulder.

"My head against your head, Poncho, that the handsome tough is the Chief of the Cactus Brotherhood," said Mosco.

Captain Poncho broke from the touching hand and stared.

"Captain Monte!" he exclaimed.

"Monte, the Cruel," was the response. "The same man who sent the unfortunate Corporal Cactus to the vultures and who also started Merle upon the same terrible journey across the plains. You show some surprise at his being here, but reflect a moment. You haven't got as many friends as you had a week ago—"

"No. Major Mesquite has bought my men," said the captain.

"And to all appearances he is master of the situation. Captain Monte knew just when to come to Cinnabar. If you will go down the trail leading between the Twin Boulders you will discover that he did not come all the way alone."

"Who are they?"

"Perhaps twenty of his merciless riders of the cactus lands. Everything is ready for Major Mesquite's coup. If nothing happens within twenty-four hours he will be virtual Boss of Cinnabar, and the Live Rattlesnake, the Golden Slipper and the Cactus Queen will be owned by one man. Not only this, but Dalia will be his wife, whether she will it or not, and Old Monteriff, the Hermit, will die without folding his lost child to his bosom."

"But something must happen!" cried Captain Poncho, striking the table with his fist.

"How many men of your gang can you trust?"

The little man's countenance fell.

"Speak out," commanded Mosco.

"Not more than ten," was the confession.

"I thought the Mesquite tongue had done its work," smiled Merle's mine-boss. "Our men are all true; sixty brave fellows who cannot be purchased. I do not intend to involve them in the quarrel if I can help it. You must postpone the sitting of the Tribunal."

"That would be a confession of weakness."

"It matters not. A court without the principal witness would be a failure anyhow. Announce that the investigation into the cause of Corporal Cactus's death will not take place until to-morrow afternoon."

Captain Poncho's eyes fairly snapped.

"I can't do that!" cried he.

"Then I will," replied Mosco.

"Two things must be accomplished to break the grip of the gold giants on Cinnabar before the convening of the Tribunal. Dalia and Captain Merle, both of them, must be found."

"I don't see how the voyager on the underground river is to be discovered. No one knows where the stream rises nor into what other body of water it empties itself. It is one of the mysteries of the subterranean world."

"All that is true, Captain Poncho," returned Mosco, the mine-boss. "But nothing must daunt us now. I am going back to the dark hunting-ground."

"To Major Mesquite's bonanza?"

"Yes."

Captain Poncho's face changed color.

"Say the word and I am with you," he exclaimed; "I think the best way to keep me out of trouble in the camp is to take me along."

"I think so, too," said Mosco. "You told me six months ago that you had discovered a secret passage leading from Major Mesquite's bonanza to yours. Is it still in existence?"

"I had it shut up, but the removal of a few stones will open it again. I thought at the time that my enemy had taken advantage of the passage, but since then I have changed my mind. It was nothing more than a natural way—a freak of underground nature, like the subterranean river."

"We will take advantage of it right away. Arm yourself and go quickly down to your mine. I will join you there within thirty min-

utes. I want to post the new notice of the meeting of the court."

A few minutes after this interview Mosco came out of Captain Poncho's cabin and went to his own.

In a little while the captain left also and walked toward his mine, grinned at derisively by a lot of men who knew all about the encounter at the ranch.

Not long afterward Mosco came forth and coolly nailed a piece of paper to the rough weatherboarded front of the ranch. It was the notice of the postponement of the inquiry into Corporal Cactus's death, and more than one man who read it smiled to himself, or did so to his companions.

Having done this, Mosco went down to the "Golden Slipper" and found Captain Poncho in one of its chambers.

"The passage to the enemy's territory is open once more," exclaimed the little nabob, leading Mosco to a dark opening that gaped like the jaws of death in the light of a mine lantern. "If you think we are to find Merle or Dalia I am eager to be off. It is a long and rough crawl from mine to mine, but the game is worth the candle, Mosco. I would crawl to the Pole to beat Major Mesquite and the Cactus Brotherhood."

It did not take long for Mute Merle's miner to lead Captain Poncho into the secret way which was as dark as the deepest night in Egypt.

The path was cramped and rough, and the men were sometimes compelled to force their bodies through very small places.

At last they stood erect once more, and Mosco turned the slide of his dark-lantern and revealed their surroundings.

They were in Major Mesquite's bonanza, and then they started off creeping along the brink of a natural ledge and feeling their way now up, now down with a smooth wall at their right.

All at once Mosco came to a halt and touched Captain Poncho when he crawled up.

"Listen!" ejaculated the mine-boss. "I am going to toss a stone from me."

The next moment a splash was distinctly heard.

"The major's underground Styx!" exclaimed the captain.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BANKS OF THE STYX.

"THE game is mine! The postponement of the opening of court means that it will never open. Captain Poncho has practically given up the fight, though it may be necessary to teach the little Bombastes of Cinnabar a lesson before the curtain falls."

Major Mesquite talked thus to the handsome man who had witnessed the meeting between the two rivals in the ranch.

The time was soon after the posting by Mosco of the announcement that the court of inquiry would not convene before two o'clock the next afternoon.

"I think they have given up the fight," answered the major's companion. "I consider you virtually owner of three bonanzas, and all has been accomplished without much bloodshed, either."

"There was very little spilled, captain—hardly enough to speak of," Major Mesquite grinned while he spoke. "If the hoodwink hadn't fallen from the eyes of the corporal's horse, we would not have had the episode of his sudden exit here. But never mind; it is all right, and Captain Poncho will not find his missing witness; no, not with Mosco to help him."

"But what about the Boy Nabob?" demanded the stranger, with impatience. "You promised to tell me something about him. When will you have a better time?"

The major laid his cigar on the little table that stood between them, and looked at his friend.

"There isn't very much to tell," said he. "The mute boy is a waif—that is, nobody here knows exactly who he is. If he knows himself, which is doubtful, he keeps the secret well. His long and frequent absences have been ferreted out. He is looking for the old hermit's child."

The bandit-looking listener gave a slight start, and a smile came to his face.

"Old Monteriff?" he exclaimed.

Major Mesquite nodded.

"We have spared the old fellow because we consider him harmless," the major's guest continued. "At any time we could swoop down upon him and destroy man and shanty in a twinkling, but what was the use of it? He harms nobody, and no one believes the story he sometimes tells about his lost baby. They con-

sider him a little cracked in the upper story, but if you say so, major, I'll send some of the boys down to visit him."

"No, captain. Let the old chap alone. As you say, he is harmless. Well, Mute Merle has become his trailer; the boy has taken a deep interest in the lost girl, and when he is not here he is looking for her. He is a strange combination of courage, shrewdness and perseverance. I sometimes wish we knew more about him than we do."

"And the corporal?" queried the Cactus brigand.

Major Mesquite made no reply, but leaned away and opened the wooden chest in one corner.

The following moment he laid a bit of crumpled paper before his guest. The edges of the document were rough and torn, as if they had been cut with a dull knife.

Captain Monte—for the handsome stranger was none other than the active chief of the Cactus Brotherhood—looked at the paper, which was covered with singular-looking characters.

"Can you make them out? I am not good on mysteries," he exclaimed, pushing the paper toward the major.

"It is a confession and a secret," was the reply. "Corporal Cactus in the first place tells about his ride across the plains on a blindfolded horse and with a gag in his mouth; having done this he proceeds to reveal the secret of the lost daughter of the old hermit. He has found Florice Monteriff; he knows who swooped down upon the fine ranch years ago and took the child from her cradle. You see, Corporal Cactus was no fool, captain."

"But why did he write all this in cipher?"

"That must ever be a secret since the corporal is dead," said Major Mesquite. "He came to Cinnabar to acquaint Mute Merle with his discovery because he knew that our young Vanderbilt was Old Monteriff's trail-hound. As Merle was absent when he got here he requested to be locked up in the private office of the Cactus Queen Mine, where he wrote that document."

"But you have but half of it here!" cried Captain Monte, holding the torn paper between him and the light. "Where is the remainder?"

"Mosco professes to have found it clutched in the corporal's dead hand."

"Why was it left there? Couldn't you have—"

"Never mind that!" interrupted Major Mesquite. "I'll wager my head that the part found by Mosco has never been deciphered. You know what a death-grip is. It was simply impossible to disengage the whole paper from Corporal Cactus's hand at the time. He knew a good deal—the corporal did. I don't know how he found out some things, but he knew them all the same."

"And among them the identity of Old Monteriff's daughter?"

"Yes."

"Who is she?"

Major Mesquite smiled.

"You arrived too late to see her, but she'll turn up safe in a short time," said he.

"Is she as pretty now as when she lay in the ranch cradle?"

"She is far lovelier, captain," was the response.

"Then she must be a beauty, for I confess that she was the loveliest babe I ever saw. I knew her mother, and you know what she was, major. When shall I see Old Monteriff's heir-ess?"

"After to-morrow."

"Oh, yes, after your final victory!" laughed the bandit of the desert. "Captain Poncho has called the Tribunal for two o'clock to-morrow."

"He won't have a witness!" exclaimed the major.

"What is the testimony, anyhow?"

"Merely this, so I understand: I was seen to go from my shanty toward the boy's bonanza while Corporal Cactus was locked up in a part of it. I was seen to come back from that direction, and afterward a man unknown to the captain's witness was noticed to arrive at and quit my cabin after night."

"Is that all?" asked Captain Monte.

"I believe it is, unless Captain Poncho has evidence which he is keeping back."

"And this important witness—"

"Is the girl, Dalia—Mute Merle's beautiful bookkeeper, and, according to Corporal Cactus, Old Monteriff's child!"

"I see! I see!" exclaimed the man from the plains. "It is a pretty deep game all around. By the way, major, what is the boy's bonanza worth?"

Major Mesquite hesitated a moment.

"It is almost too rich to estimate," he replied, at length. "I went through it by lantern-light and found it the most surprising mine I ever saw. It is worth double the Live Rattlesnake and the Golden Slipper combined."

"Jupiter!" cried Captain Monte. "The silent boy struck it rich when he landed here. Do you think he suspects Dalia's identity?"

"He knows nothing."

"Unless Mosco gave him the torn cipher found in the corporal's hand and he discovered the key."

"He did nothing of the sort," broke out the major. "Merle the young nabob has ere this reached the shores of eternal silence, and the secret connected with the girl's life is ours."

This seemed to satisfy the handsome, long-haired man who sat at the major's table. He smiled approval and took out a fresh cigar.

"I would like to know what becomes of your river, major," he resumed, as he struck his match.

"So would I!" was the quick response.

"You have never tried to follow it?"

"I?" Major Mesquite drew back and stared at the questioner. "I wouldn't undertake a voyage of that kind for all the bonanzas under ground. The black tide loses itself somewhere in the bowels of the earth. It passes into caverns that have not been explored—not even by my most adventuresome men. Many a time they have sent little fire-rafts down the stream, and the water has carried them on and on till they have been lost sight of in the Stygian gloom. No! not for the world would I tempt the unknown dangers of that mysterious river!"

"I prefer to stick to the plains," smiled Captain Monte. "There one has sunlight and air."

"And vultures, too," added the major. "But I prefer the blackbirds to the snares of my death-tide. Would you like to see the Styx, captain?"

"Nothing would suit me better."

Major Mesquite sprung up and announced his willingness to lead his guest to the shores of the strange river. Ten minutes later they entered the Live Rattlesnake, and the major led the desert freebooter to a certain spot from which both could see the flowing tide by the assistance of a lantern.

Captain Monte went down to the edge of the bank and dipped his hand into the water.

It was cold.

"Your Styx must come from the ice seas of the North!" he exclaimed, coming back to the man waiting for him.

Major Mesquite shook his head with a smile.

"If we only knew what Mute Merle discovered before he succumbed we might not be entirely ignorant concerning your river," continued the bandit.

"I know enough," answered the big nabob.

"But what is that yonder? Do you work your men at night?"

Already the major was gazing over Captain Monte's leveled arm with an expression of surprise on his face.

"It is a moving light," he replied, at last. "Some of my men are liable to be in the mine, but not yonder. That light is moving down the bank of the river, but on the opposite one. The stream is not wide here. I will shut off our light before the man yonder discovers it. Now let us wait for him."

In silence the two men watched the moving spark until it stood still at a point directly across from them.

All at once Major Mesquite seized his companion's wrist.

"My God! the most troublesome man alive is on the alert!" he whispered, and at the same time he drew and cocked a revolver.

"Who is over there?" asked the bandit.

"Captain Poncho!"

CHAPTER XVI.

WINGED.

MAJOR MESQUITE continued to hold the revolver, while he glared tigerishly at the man on the other side of the stream.

The light from Captain Poncho's bull's-eye streamed across the dark water and revealed its glittering surface to the two men now on the watch.

The little figure of Poncho was plainly visible.

"He may not be alone," whispered the Cactus bandit, touching restrainingly the arm that

came up deliberately with the cocked six-shooter. "Let us wait a minute longer, major."

Major Mesquite held back. By and by another figure was seen to join the nabob of the "Golden Slipper."

It was a good deal taller than Captain Poncho, and its shoulders were much broader than his.

"Mosco, the boy's right bower!" grated the major, at sight of the second figure. "They are searching for the young nabob."

"But as the river long since took him into the unknown, they will not be successful. Water leaves no trail."

Major Mesquite said nothing in reply.

He and Captain Monte were screened from hostile observation by a ledge of rock. If Poncho had flashed his light across the river, it would not have revealed his watchers, though they could see his every movement as long as he kept his bull's-eye ablaze.

At length Mosco was seen to take the lantern from Poncho's hand and to approach the water's edge.

It was some distance down the rather steep bank, and his action left Captain Poncho in the dark.

Mosco moved the light along the shore, which at the water's edge was clayey and tough.

Did he expect to find any trail there?

Three minutes afterward he went back and handed the lantern to Poncho, who threw its glare up-stream, in which direction the agile mine-boss hastened and soon disappeared.

"I shall drop the atom now!" hissed Major Mesquite, but Monte's hand touched him as before.

"Wait till Mosco comes back. There is more of this drama underground. Let us see all of it before we do anything."

The major looked at his companion, and Captain Poncho got another respite.

In a short time Mosco came back, dragging after him a small raft which consisted of light logs ingeniously lashed together.

He placed the raft in the water where Captain Poncho stood, and then turned to the little man, who was throwing the light of his lantern upon the odd craft.

"I'll relieve you now," said Mosco, in tones that reached the trained ears of the listeners. "You can feel your way back to the bend; after that you will have no trouble. Good-by. If I find anything, I will report, and I will make a discovery of some kind or never report at all."

Mosco took the lantern and secured it to his body with a strap, after which he waved Captain Poncho an adieu and shoved the raft out into the tide.

This was done so suddenly, and with such a surprising boldness, that Mosco was well adrift before Major Mesquite and his friend could fully realize what had happened.

Captain Poncho was in the dark, they knew not where, and a floating spark told where the courageous Mosco was breasting the perils of the mysterious river.

The major could have cursed himself for the escape of his rival, and when he found that Mosco was also getting away, he sprung to the water's edge and aimed at the spark on the tide.

The next instant a loud report filled the cavern. A cannon could not have made a more deafening sound there, and the light disappeared as if the bullet had broken the bull's-eye and snuffed it out.

"He won't find the Boy Nabob now!" cried Major Mesquite while the place still rung with the echoes of the pistol-shot. "There is but one way out of the 'Live Rattlesnake' for the other one. Come! this way, captain."

He took Captain Monte's hand and ran back from the river and then down a narrow corridor with a high arched roof.

He almost dragged the handsome bandit forward in his eagerness.

"We've got Poncho in his last trap!" he went on, ending the sentence with a triumphant laugh. "He can no more get out now than a fox can wriggle from beneath the dead-fall that has crushed him. I'm anxious to cut off the atom's retreat. Am I running too fast for you, captain?"

On, on went Major Mesquite.

He seemed to know his bonanza as well by night as in the daytime, or by torchlight. Out of breath he halted at last and laughed.

"We are ahead of him now!" said he. "I took a short cut, one which he cannot find owing to the situation of the natural bridge on which he must cross the river. Now, silence,

Captain Monte. We will have the one I did not kill in a few minutes."

Then commenced a watching and waiting for the prey which did not come.

Major Mesquite had reached a narrow place in the corridor leading to the opening of his mine and not far from the opening itself.

For more than an hour he and the desert desperado waited there ready to pounce upon Captain Poncho the moment he should reach the spot, but the little man in high boots did not put in an appearance.

"Is he going to keep to the mine?" growled the major out of patience and in the worst of humor. "Don't he know that this is not his bonanza but mine, and therefore an underground land of death? He can't tire me out. I will put others on the watch while we go back to the shanties for a change. I will have the mine searched. What is the use of secrecy any longer? I have bought all his men, and he is helpless and friendless where he has been powerful. With Mosco drifting dead toward his lost master and Poncho a prisoner in the 'Live Rattlesnake,' don't you see that the game is won, captain?"

Major Mesquite proceeded to a small room not unlike Mute Merle's private mine-office and jerked a stout cord that hung along the stone wall.

Having done this he went back to Captain Monte, and in a little while two men came up from the outside.

The major explained everything in a few hasty words, and when he left the mine with the plain bandit, the stalwart men were on hand with orders to seize the first person who came from the interior of the bonanza.

Mesquite and Monte went up among the cabins.

The former got together twenty men and gave them certain instructions. They were to go down into the mine and search it thoroughly for Captain Poncho. If found he was to be treated as a spy according to the laws of Cinnabar, and that meant death on the scene of his transgression!

The band went away eager for the hunt, and Major Mesquite smiled his satisfaction to the man with whom he had been left.

"This is better than I expected—two birds at one shot!" he exclaimed. "There won't be a foot of ground left unsearched by my foxes. They know the mine as you know the cactus desert, captain, and the report that I will hear before long will gladden my ears."

"An hour passed, then another, and the first half of the third."

Major Mesquite showed his impatience by furtive looks toward the door. He saw the sun making the shadows in camp longer and longer, but the absent hunters did not report.

"I could have searched the mine myself ere this!" he broke out. "Does it take twenty men, each one a ferret, to find a nervous fellow like Captain Poncho?"

He went to the door and opened it as if with the intention of going back to the mine in person, but in a jiffy he recoiled from the threshold with a cry that started Captain Monte forward.

"The rat gave them the slip!" he cried, flushed to the temples and hoarse with rage. "The Atom of Cinnabar was too much for my twenty giants. Look at the turkey-cock of Arizona, captain. If he isn't in full feather may I be hung for a Mormon saint!"

Monte, who was already at the major's elbow, was looking at the object in the street, which was no less an attraction than Captain Poncho in person, in "full feather," as the major had said, and apparently none the worse for his visit to the bonanza.

The little man strutted past the cabin like a victorious turkey-cock in the full flush of victory over an antagonist.

He turned his eyes neither to the right nor to the left, as if he disdained to give the abode of his rival even so much attention as a glance.

The spectacle sent Major Mesquite's blood up to the boiling point.

"Watch me spoil his feathers!" he cried, with a look at Captain Monte, and again the revolver which had covered the little nabob in the mine was jerked out.

The door was wide open now, and the burly figure of the nabob Hercules was conspicuous on the step.

As he raised the weapon, Captain Poncho threw up a hand which the parties in the shanty had not seen, and in an instant, as a sharp shot rung out, Major Mesquite threw down his revolver and began to dance over the boards, yelling and swearing in his pain.

The desert bandit quite forgot the man in the

street in the ludicrous antics of the winged bully, and when the major quieted down enough to have his hurt examined, Captain Poncho had disappeared.

A bullet in the wrist was not much, but it undoubtedly saved the life of the man who had put it there—the turkey-cock of Cinnabar.

CHAPTER XVII.

GRIT IN HIGH BOOTS.

THE "hottest" man in Cinnabar was Major Mesquite.

He ground his teeth till they fairly cracked, and swore all sorts of vengeance against Captain Poncho.

Meantime the little man had walked composedly from the scene of the shooting, and had reentered his shanty.

Major Mesquite could not understand how he had escaped from the mine. He did not think of the natural tunnel between the two bonanzas, and his forgetfulness increased the mystery of Captain Poncho's escape.

But let us go back to the mine itself and follow the fortunes of the courageous Mosco, whom we saw last floating down the Styx in search of Mute Merle, the Boy Nabob.

Major Mesquite's bullet, intended for Mosco's head, went singing past, and cut the dark water a few feet away.

The whiz of the deadly missile caused Mosco to extinguish the light which he had taken with him, and he did this so quickly as to cause Major Mesquite to think that he had accomplished his purpose.

The mine-boss drifted a long time through the most intense gloom.

He knew not whither the underground tide was taking him, and he could only hope that he would succeed in his undertaking.

At length he turned on the light again.

He was now in a cavern-like place far from the starting-point, and in a part of the bonanza totally unknown to him.

He paddled his little raft to shore by means of his hands, and soon stood erect on a narrow bank backed by an almost perpendicular wall.

Mosco walked along the dark shore, and sent the beams of his lantern hither and thither.

On, on he went, now at the very edge of the water, and no small distance from it.

All at once he stopped and leaned forward, while he concentrated his light upon an object that had accidentally caught his eye.

The course of the underground river seemed to have been checked by an obstruction of broken stone.

The huge boulders might have fallen from the ceiling above, and although the river flowed between them, they formed a natural bridge for the venturesome man.

"Can it be that I have found Little Silent?" Mosco asked himself, as he gazed at the singular object he had singled out. "The outlines appear to be those of a boy. My head to a copper that I have found Cinnabar's young Vanderbilt!"

The next minute Mosco was moving over the obstruction, crawling from stone to stone with but one object in view, that of reaching the middle of the river.

"I was right!" he cried when he halted and held his light down a moment. "I have found the boss boy of Arizona. Now won't somebody pay well for this piece of work?"

Sure enough beneath the boss of the Cactus Queen Mine, and lashed to the log which had been his boat for hours, lay the dead-like body of Mute Merle.

The light streaming over his face rendered it ghostly, and Mosco thought at first that he had found a dead boy.

A closer examination caused him to give utterance to a cry of joy, and in another second he was pulling Merle out of the water, for his knife had already cut him loose from the log.

Merle was dragged up on the natural bridge and more closely scrutinized by Mosco. The Boy Nabob was alive, and the look that lit up his eyes when he recognized his preserver was reward enough for Mosco.

"Now," cried the mine-boss, holding the light so that Merle could see his lips, "now, how are we going to get out of this place?"

Merle's fingers began to fly at once.

"We can't drift up-stream," they said. "Therefore, we must hunt an outlet below the bridge."

"Come, then! the sooner the better!" was the quick response. "We must meet the Tribunal when it opens. Not only that, but we must find

Dalia, the witness who can prick Major Mesquite's golden bubble."

The boy seized Mosco's hand and started off.

They went down the narrow shore together. The river flowing sullenly past them lost itself in darkness that seemed capable of being touched, but this did not awe the two companions.

They traveled more than a mile thus, when Merle stopped and pointed overhead. Mosco saw something shining like a star; it seemed to increase in brilliancy while he looked.

"It is a star in the sky!" exclaimed the young Nabob on his fast-flying fingers. "Let us go up to it at once. There must be a way."

It did not take the two friends long to find that way. The river at that point flowed through a cavern, far above, which was the open though wild country of Arizona. They found a rough stairway leading up the rocks, and in a little while they were climbing hand over hand like apes and toward the star that shone so brilliantly.

It was a hard journey upward, seemingly a climb to the star itself, but the twain kept on and on until Mosco with a joyful cry announced escape.

Mute Merle grasped the overseer's hands in transports of delight, and then looked toward the clustered camps of Cinnabar, at which he pointed a finger.

There was fire in his eyes.

"I know what that means," mentally exclaimed Mosco. "He is going to strike back with interest. You had better look out, Major Mesquite."

Half an hour later a figure crossed the threshold of the Boy Nabob's cabin and closed the door.

Many hours had elapsed since Merle's start down the Styx, and night had come again.

Major Mesquite, still nursing a shattered wrist, was venting his anger on Captain Poncho, but he had not taken a step toward retaliation.

He knew that the little mine king was quick with the trigger, and, after all, the major, big as he was, did not possess bravery enough to confront the gentleman in high boots.

"He won't have the sand to open the Tribunal," said he to the handsome tough of the desert. "The hour will pass with Captain Poncho away from the scene, and it will make him the laughing-stock of the camp. Then we'll get shut of him."

"But the girl witness, major?" put in Captain Monte. "When will I get to see her pretty face?"

"After the farce!" laughed the golden Hercules. "With Poncho out of the way, we will bring the girl to the front again, and Major Mesquite will control the three bonanzas of Cinnabar."

Captain Monte allowed a smile to flit across his bronzed face.

"Then you call the Boy Nabob lost?" he remarked.

"Lost! Forever lost!" exclaimed the major. "No man who tries the waters of my Styx ever returns to tell the story of the voyage! There is no Mute Merle. He is but one of the recollections of the mountain camp of the Southwest."

As the major ended he looked at his watch.

"In one hour the Tribunal will assemble," he continued. "The men who come together at Captain Poncho's call will never see the turkey-cock of Cinnabar open court. He will stick to his shanty, for he knows that the Mesquite bullet waits for him whenever he shows his head."

The call for the Tribunal, posted by Mosco for Captain Poncho, still fluttered from the bulletin-board of the camp.

The hour, two o'clock, was near at hand, and the men of Cinnabar were saying among themselves that Captain Poncho would not appear in the face of the banded opposition to him. His men, who had been bought up by his rival, were as loud in their breathings of hatred as were any of Major Mesquite's adherents. Mute Merle's miners had not been tampered with.

The giant nabob knew better than to make any attempts in that direction, for the sixty raw-boned men of the Cactus Queen were true as steel to their young master.

They knew nothing of the scenes in the heart of the "Live Rattlesnake" bonanza. They were—many of them, at least, ignorant of the existence of the underground river, and they were supposed to believe that Merle was off on one of his strange absences, and would return at his leisure.

As the hour of two drew near a few men went over to the spot where the courts of Cinnabar were usually held. They did not expect

that the death of Corporal Cactus would be investigated.

By and by these men were joined by others until the court-ground held more than one-half of the citizens of the mountain camp.

It was the duty of the person who had called the Tribunal to open it.

The hour crept on till the hands of Captain Monte's watch announced the chosen time.

Major Mesquite, standing by the bandit of the cactus desert, looked again at his watch and smiled.

"It is as I told you," he laughed. "The door of Captain Poncho's shanty is shut like the door of a tomb. The coward won't open court to-day nor any other time."

Captain Monte looked toward Poncho's cabin, which was in full view.

The following moment the door opened and the figure of the pigmy nabob appeared in the moonlight.

"There he is, major," returned the desperado. "It looks as if we were going to have court after all."

"Not by that atom! He'll go back into his hole in a minute. No! by Jupiter! he is actually coming this way—walking into the jaws of death, as it were," and Major Mesquite stared at the man in high boots while he came toward the Square with the coolness of a hero under fire.

Captain Poncho did not seem to notice his rival, and in a little while he came up with a smile on his lips and waved his hand to the astonished crowd as he turned to declare open for business the Tribunal of Cinnabar.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FINISHED.

ALL eyes were turned on Captain Poncho.

"Gentlemen," began he, in his usual tone of voice, "the hour has come for opening the Court of Cinnabar according to proclamation. If there is any objection, let it be made now; if not made, let the dissatisfied forever hold their peace."

There was no response besides the cold, derisive smile upon Major Mesquite's face.

"What are you going to do?" whispered Monte, the desert tough, as he leaned slightly toward the major.

"I'm going to let him put his own head in the noose," was the reply. "The fool in high boots has everything against him. What can he prove? Nothing! The witness is safe, and the absence of Mute Merle and Mosco paralyzes the men of Cactus Queen Mine."

The mountain Tribunal was opened without any great ceremonies, and Captain Poncho stated the business it was expected to transact.

He recounted the arrival of Corporal Cactus, the retirement of the unknown man to the underground chamber, and the subsequent discovery of his dead body by the mine-boss, Mosco.

The narrative was listened to with breathless silence.

Captain Poncho then said that there was suspicion that the corporal had been murdered by some one who had unlocked the mine door for that purpose. He believed that the mystery should be cleared up and the guilty punished. He was willing to convict and hang his best friend if he was the man, and for the best interests of Cinnabar he hoped that none would shield the wretch.

Having said this much, Captain Poncho, who acted as high sheriff, drew from his pocket a paper from which he read the names of parties who had been summoned as witnesses.

They were six in number, and they were expected to tell what they knew about Corporal Cactus's death.

The last name on the list was that of Dalia—Dalia, the missing.

"There will be no last witness," murmured Major Mesquite. "This court is the most roaring farce of the age. I'm bound to see it through."

The first witness was a tall man who, with half a dozen others, had sauntered into the open-air court after Captain Poncho's arrival.

He knew but little. He had seen a man in the vicinity of the locked mine between midnight and morning of the fatal night, but he could not identify the person.

Witness after witness came on in rapid succession.

The man in high boots questioned each one in turn, and when the fifth had been dismissed Major Mesquite's men looked at one another.

"Dalia, of Cinnabar!" called Captain Poncho. The name seemed to die away in the echo that followed it.

"He may call till doomsday, eh, major?" smiled Captain Monte.

"Ay, till the day after," was the quick retort.

"We shall send for this witness," continued the little nabob, with a sly glance at Mesquite.

He singled out a man who stood near and directed him to go to Dalia's cabin and tell her that she was wanted at the Tribunal.

"The Atom of Camp Cinnabar has lost his head!" exclaimed the major.

"I am not so sure. He plays his hand with a certain coolness I can't get over," answered the desert bandit.

The messenger was seen to approach the cabin, which stood in fair view, and all watched him open the door and put his head inside.

A moment later he stepped back and waved his hand toward the Cactus Queen bonanza; then he stood still as if waiting for some one.

In a few seconds a number of men came in sight down the road leading to the mountains.

"The miners of the Cactus!" exclaimed half a dozen men on the Square. "The signal was for them. They have been waiting for it, as if they knew it would come."

The rough-shirted men came on, sixty of them, giant fellows for the most part, men of unquestioned nerve and courage.

They stopped in front of Dalia's cabin.

In a moment the door opened and a female figure walked from the hut among the men.

Major Mesquite could not keep back an exclamation. He looked at Captain Poncho, who did not appear to be the least ruffled as he watched the approach of the miners from the west.

Dalia had been swallowed up by the ranks, but when the foremost stalwarts reached the court they opened ranks and the girl herself stepped out.

"Dalia of Cinnabar!" repeated Captain Poncho.

The reply was not an instant delayed.

"Here!"

As the girl spoke the high sheriff looked at the crowd in court.

"I add two more witnesses to the list," said he. "I call the names of Mosco and Mute Merle."

A well-built man stepped forward and swept from his face a reddish beard.

In a flash he stood revealed as Mosco the mine-boss!

Almost at the same time the densest part of the sixty men separated and a boy with a flashing eye stepped three paces to the front.

MUTE MERLE!

Captain Poncho gave the major a glance of victory.

"First, Miss Dalia's story," he resumed.

"We will hear what she saw the night Corporal Cactus died in the underground office."

The beautiful bookkeeper of the Cactus Queen caught the major's eye as she was about to begin.

"If you dare!" said the look she got in return, but, this only seemed to steel her nerves in firmness.

"You've got to do one of two things right away," whispered Monte to Major Mesquite.

"Well?"

"The man at the head of this affair must be killed in his tracks before the girl testifies, or you must turn your back forever on the three bonanzas."

The big major bit his lips.

"The latter I will not do," he grated. "The former I can."

"Then go to work."

Captain Poncho had edged nearer to the last witness.

For a moment his body was between her and the major, and he sent one hand to his hip and let it rest there.

Quick as a thought, almost, the miners of the Cactus Queen advanced, halted in front of the "creatures" of the big nabob.

"In the first place, I accuse Major Mesquite of taking the life of Corporal Cactus," cried Captain Poncho. "Let us have a court that is a court. Man for man, gentlemen. Let justice be done in Cinnabar as well as elsewhere!"

At these words the hands of Major Mesquite left his hip but it held nothing.

Captain Monte had whispered three words:

"Take your chances."

"That makes it a fair fight," cried the major.

"The mask is off at last and the turkey-cock of Cinnabar has turned to a vulture. I am the slayer of Corporal Cactus, am I? Impanel your

jury and bring on your proof! Do it now. Man to man as the schemer spoke it. I am ready!"

The next instant a figure stepped to the front and whirled upon the sixty miners who faced Major Mesquite's men with their hands on the butts of their revolvers.

It was the Mute Boy Nabob.

He threw up both hands and began to talk to his miners, all of whom understood the swift-spoken language of the fingers.

"It is a lie!" roared Major Mesquite, his face a flaming red as he launched himself forward and clutched Merle's shoulder. "Here, you mute Jonah! I want to settle forever with you. I—"

The boy broke away and threw up his hand.

Three times his fingers opened and closed, and then a dozen men leaped at Major Mesquite.

Foremost of all was Mosco, the mine-boss, and it was his hand that first touched the Arizona Nabob's throat.

For a minute there were fears of a most desperate encounter between the rival factions of the camp, but the sixty men of the Cactus Queen, with fingers at the trigger, kept the purchased creatures of Major Mesquite from opening the battle.

Captain Monte saw all this with staring eyes. It had happened in a space of time so short that it could not be fully comprehended.

"The game is up," he mentally exclaimed.

"Major Mesquite withheld his 'hand' a minute too long. The Styx has sent back its two voyagers, and the lost witness has been found."

"Don't go, captain," said a voice at his elbow as a hand touched his arm.

The desperado of the desert broke loose and fell back.

"I mean what I say if you don't object," continued the same voice, and before it had finished Captain Monte was looking into the face of Poncho, the pigmy sport.

Not only this, but he saw a silver-mounted six-shooter in the little captain's hand!

It is five days after.
Night has just fallen again upon Cinnabar, and six men quit the cluster of huts and moved toward the mountains.

By and by they came upon a man holding a horse, and one of the six is bound Mazeppa-like to the animal.

But few words are spoken.

"Now, to wolf and vulture, Captain Monte!" pronounces one of the men. "Old Monteriff has found the child you stole from her cradle, years ago. Dalia has become Florice, the gold game of Major Mesquite has fallen flat, Corporal Cactus has been avenged and Mute Merle is Nabob still. This is justice as well as vengeance, and if you can find the Cactus Brotherhood, of which you are the head, you may turn on the loyal hearts of Cinnabar as you see best. Farewell, Captain Monte! The mills of the gods have just finished a patient grist."

The bandit's horse received a smart blow that started him forward, and in a moment he was out of sight.

The six men looked awhile and then went back. In time they filed down the central street of Cinnabar and went their ways.

One of them came to a certain cabin, which he entered, to be confronted by a boy, whose face had an eager and anxious look.

"It is done," announced the man. "Captain Monte has gone to the sun and the vultures!"

The boy turned to look at an old man—Old Monteriff, the hermit—who held a beautiful young girl in his arms.

Mosco had found this girl in the heart of the Live Rattlesnake Bonanza, and she had appeared in court to beat the cool game of Cinnabar's traitor—Major Mesquite—who had paid dearly for his visit to Corporal Cactus in the underground chamber.

As time rolled on, the bonanzas of Cinnabar increased in richness. The "Live Rattlesnake" was consolidated with the "Golden Slipper," and both were owned by Captain Poncho.

Mute Merle clung to the "Cactus Queen," and also to another queen of more real worth, and, when the time came, old Monteriff joined the two hands, and thus ended the drama of the bonanza fight of Cinnabar.

No tidings ever came back from Captain Monte, the bandit Mazeppa, and we can truthfully say, at the end of our story, that he went bound, as he deserved, to the vultures of the Cactus Plains!

THE END.

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